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COLONISTS AND FOREIGN MISSIONARIES OF ANCIENT INDIA



1719

P. THOMAS

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In this interesting book, Mr. Thomas gives biographical sketches of important missionaries, colonists and adventurers of ancient India who were responsible for founding kingdoms outside India and carrying Indian religions and culture to distant lands. The biographies include, among others, the lives of: *Vijaya*, Conqueror of Ceylon, *Sanghamitra*, the First Woman Foreign Missionary in World History, *Kaundinya*, Civiliser of South East Asia, *Kasyapa Matanga*, the First Indian Missionary to China, *Bodhidharma*, the Founder of Ch'an Buddhism in the Far East, and *Padmasambhava*, the Founder of Lamaism in Tibet.

Much original research has gone into the writing of this book; it is intended for the general reader as well as the student, and is written in an engaging style which makes the work eminently readable.

5/-

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By P. Thomas

KAMA KALPA
CHRISTIANITY IN ANCIENT INDIA
EPICS MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF INDIA
HINDU RELIGION CUSTOMS AND MANNERS
THE STORY OF THE CULTURAL EMPIRE OF INDIA
CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA & PAKISTAN

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INTRODUCTION

The world knows but too well of Megasthenese, Fa Hien, Huien Tsang, Ibn Batuta and other travellers and pilgrims who came to India and wrote about the country and its people, but very little of the great Indians who were responsible for carrying Indian religions and civilisation to the countries of South East Asia, Central Asia, Tibet, China and other distant lands.

From the time of Asoka till the Muslim conquest was a period of Indian cultural expansion, and during this important phase of Indian history Brahminism and Buddhism had not only exerted their influence on countries bordering on India but had spread to many foreign lands through the efforts of missionaries, colonists, merchants and adventurers. The abiding influence of India on the cultures of Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Cambodia, the Malay Peninsula, Java, Sumatra and other islands of the Indian Ocean made the people of these regions look to India as the mother country of their civilisation. Indian civilisation is a living force in these lands even now, though in Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula Islam has been super-imposed on it.

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The expansion of Brahminism was generally confined to Indonesia and certain other countries of South East Asia, but Buddhism with its missionary zeal and international outlook not only spread to the countries where Brahminism had established itself but completely took over Tibet and Central Asia, and exerted its profound influence on Mongolia and China and through the latter, brought Korea and Japan within India's extensive cultural ambit. In fact, from the early centuries of the Christian era right down to the tenth century, all the countries of Asia from Persia to Japan, from Mongolia to Ceylon formed one cultural commonwealth with India as its centre and fountain-head.

It is clear that this wide diffusion of Indian culture could not have been possible without zealous, devoted individuals who dedicated their lives to the spread of their faith and culture to distant lands and strange people, but unfortunately Indian literature and tradition, now extant, are silent about the labours of these zealots and do not even give us their names. The eminent scholar Vogel, who devoted his life to the study of Indian origins in South East Asia, observes that in the whole literature of ancient India, both Sanskrit and Pali, he could find only one solitary mention of Java, a country which owed its pre-Muslim civilisation solely to India. In fact, ancient Indian literature is so sterile in accounts of the country's overseas activities that even for the meagre information we now possess, we are indebted to foreign sources.

The reason for the absence of contemporary literary accounts of the colonial activities of India is certainly not the antipathy of our ancestors to recording their achievements. For in the memoirs of Huien Tsang, the pilgrim mentions several Sanskrit works he had consulted

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and "the substance of which he had translated". It is interesting to note, in this connection, what Saint-Hilaire says in his work on Huien Tsang: "The most important point would be to know the real nature of the Sanskrit works Hiouen Thsang* consulted, and of which he has transmitted the substance. But it is rather difficult to form an exact idea of these works, and it is worth much even to know of their existence. The Sanskrit literature, as far it is known to us, shows us nothing like them, and judging from the frequent quotations Hiouen Thsang makes from the Sanskrit *memoirs* he made use of and had under his eyes—for he often translates them word for word—it seems certain that these memoirs bore little resemblance to the *Mahavansa* written in Pali, which Turnour has given us, nor to the *Rajtarangini*, which we owe to Troyer. We must therefore, conclude that in the seventh century after Christ, at the time when the Chinese pilgrim travelled over India, there were to be found in Sanskrit literature works which described more or less faithfully the history, statistics and geography of the country; none of which has come down to us. This is, doubtless, a very unexpected and curious discovery, but it is no less a fact." Saint-Hilaire adds that Huien Tsang individually mentioned the works he had consulted and he particularly noted that there were systems of recording events in the courts of rulers in India. "The collection of annals and royal edicts is called Nilafita. Good and evil are both recorded, as well as calamities or happy omens."

"It would therefore, seem," concludes Saint-Hilaire, "that it is a hasty assertion to say that the Indian genius

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* Except in quotations, I have followed in this book, as in my other books, the spelling Huien Tsang - Author.

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had no knowledge of history; and that in its constant preoccupation with the absolute and the infinite, it had never thought of noting the lapse of time nor of recording in any lasting manner the events that were taking place. India felt this need like the rest of humanity, and tried to satisfy it in the best way it could, and Hiouen Thsang's testimony, although it stands almost alone, is perfectly undeniable on this subject. His proofs are too constantly repeated. and he relies on too many different authorities for his credibility to be doubted for an instant."

The truth is, Indian history has passed through many vicissitudes, and what is true of one phase or people is not always true of another. Asoka, as we know, took pride in sharing the wisdom of the Master with other nations, and recorded in stone his tireless efforts to make the law known to the ends of the world; his example was followed throughout the Buddhist period in India, and in Huien Tsang's time several works were probably available which had bearing on the growth and expansion of Indian culture abroad. But with the revival of Brahminism a reaction against the international temper of Buddhism set in; we know for a fact that later Brahminical literature became so conservative and exclusive that far from taking a pride in India's colonial culture, it considered it a shame that the heritage of India be shared with the unworthy. The tendency of this period was to let in nothing from outside into India and let out nothing from the country.

This attitude gained strength from the neglect Buddhist learning suffered with the Hindu revival in India. It is noteworthy that neither the Pali nor the Sanskrit Canon was preserved in India, even for purposes of antiquarian study. The vast body of Buddhist literature perished in

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the country for want of patronage if not through deliberate antagonism. All foreign contacts were thoroughly discouraged, and sea voyage became taboo for the higher castes. To divulge the esoteric wisdom of the ancients to outsiders was reckoned a sin, and there was possibly a systematic expurgation of texts and passages, in well-known works, dealing with India's foreign commerce and colonial expansion. The rise of Tantric cults, with their emphasis on secrecy, further strengthened parochial tendencies. It was while India's link with her cultural commonwealth was thus being cut; that the Muslims invaded India; with the Muslim dominance, India looked to the West for cultural ties and she was completely isolated from the eastern countries, the civilisation of most of which was built and nurtured by her.

When the British domination of India began, the Hindus were an extremely stay-at-home people with no colonial ambitions whatsoever; in fact the taboo against sea voyage was so strictly enforced among the upper castes all over India that the British naturally thought that the sea was something Indians dreaded. It was well nigh impossible for the Europeans or even Indians of the time to have thought that ancient Hindus were responsible for building up the civilisation of South East Asia, and the Christian missionaries, who noticed strange similarities between the art and architecture of India and South East Asia, may be pardoned when they put down the similarity to the want of originality in the devil who inspired all heathen art alike.

Only through the study of Indology by orientalists towards the close of the nineteenth century and during the twentieth century, did the fascinating story of ancient Indian cultural expansion begin to unfold itself. The

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narrative has but just started, and years of patient research by devoted scholars will still be necessary before the full story will have been told.

While India has preserved practically nothing of the literature pertaining to her cultural conquests abroad, the Buddhist countries do have translations and original works throwing much light on the subject; these and the epigraphical evidence discovered in South East Asia and elsewhere, are our main sources of information concerning the great men whose biographical sketches are given in this book.

Like my previous work, *The Story of the Cultural Empire of India*, this book also is intended mainly for the general reader, and hence I have avoided elaborate references and footnotes which are likely to be a cause of annoyance to the lay reader. The more important of the books I have consulted, and from which quotations or illustrations have been reproduced, may, however, be mentioned here. These are: *Hinduism and Buddhism* by Sir Charles Eliot, *Studies in Zen* by D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism* by Christmas Humphreys, *India and China* by P. C. Bagchi, *South Indian Influences in the Far East* by K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *Hiouen Thsang in India* by Saint-Hilaire and *Tibetan Religious Art* by Antoinette K. Gordon.

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I

VIJAYA

CONQUEROR OF CEYLON

The island of Ceylon was known in ancient India as Lanka. The Hindu and Buddhist traditions differ substantially concerning the original inhabitants of the island before the Indian conquest of the island. The *Ramayana*, as is well known, has for its central theme, the conquest of Lanka by Rama, prince of Ayodhya. In the epic Lanka is depicted as the land of a powerful brood of demons called Rakshasas ruled by the ten-headed giant Ravana. Ravana and his people, though mentioned as blood-thirsty cannibals, had a well-developed technique in war, and Rama and his allies had to resort to many strategems before they could vanquish the Rakshasas; these were great builders too, and the forts, ramparts and other defence systems of Lanka, as well as the palaces of Ravana, were considered even better than those of the Indo-Aryans.

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The Buddhist accounts give us an entirely different picture. The demons who were in occupation of Ceylon, at the time of the conquest of the island by Vijaya, a prince from North India, were depicted in Buddhist scriptures as unredeemed savages with no cultural attainments whatsoever. There is, however, a suggestion in Sinhalese accounts that, after the conquest of the island by Rama and the destruction of Ravana and his people, the arts and sciences fell into neglect, and the island was occupied by cannibals whom the Buddhist scriptures speak of as Yakshas.

Anyway, one thing is clear. Rama made no effort to occupy the island of Ceylon, but after the destruction of Ravana and his Rakshasas went back to Ayodhya with Sita. Vijaya, of the Buddhist legend, however, stands on a different footing. He is reputed to have conquered the island with seven hundred men (some accounts say, five hundred) and after destroying the Yakshas occupied the land and founded a dynasty, the descendants of which ruled the island till it passed under Europeans. As such, whatever may be the historic worth of the epic accounts of the conquest of Ceylon by Rama, the legend of Vijaya, it is clear, contains an element of historic truth.

The origin of Vijaya is shrouded in a maze of myth and legend. Available evidence would indicate that he was a prince of North India, of the ancient Vanga country corresponding to the present Bengal. He is fabled to have been born of a king of leonine descent who, on this account, built a city named Sinhaba (of the lion) and made it the capital of his kingdom. His own name too, it would appear, was Sinhaba. Vijaya, it seems, was Sinhaba's eldest son, and the heir apparent.

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Vijaya, it is related, was born under an evil star. While he was destined for great things, he was to become unpopular in his own land and suffer exile. As it was fated so it did happen. As the prince grew into a fine young man, some seven hundred youths, born under the same star as himself, rallied round him and chose him as their leader. The activities of these young firebrands became unbearable for the peaceful citizens of the kingdom and they complained to the king that it would be impossible for respectable people to live in a land terrorised by seven hundred desperadoes led by the crown prince. The king had an enquiry instituted into the objectionable activities of the prince; his guilt was proved and Sinhaba decided to exile Vijaya and his associates.

Accordingly, a ship was built and Vijaya and the seven hundred were forced to board the ship which was then left adrift. The date the ship left the harbour is given as the seventh day after the Parinirvana of the Buddha.

There were, it would appear, some able sailors among the exiles and the ship steered south. The method of navigation in those far off days was by hugging the coast as direct sailing of the Bay of Bengal or the Arabian Sea was too hazardous a venture for the primitive seamen.

Vijaya and his men had no particular destination in view but were on the look out for a suitable place for settling down. It would appear they sailed from Tamralipti, the port of Vanga, down the Coromandel Coast and round the Cape to the West Coast as far as Bharatkucha (Broach) which was then the main port of Western India. Not finding a congenial place on the coastal regions of India which had probably well established kingdoms that resented the intrusion of the seven hundred miscreants and their

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leader, they steered south from Bharatkucha and landed in Ceylon.

According to Ceylonese accounts, the Yakshas who were then inhabiting the island of Ceylon were ruled by a queen named Kuveni. It would appear that the men Vijaya sent inland to reconnoiter the region were captured by the Yakshas and in the negotiations that followed between Vijaya and Kuveni, the prince could get back his men only by marrying Kuveni and settling down in the island with his men. In the persistent Buddhist tradition about the Yakshas of Ceylon, which appears in many Jataka Tales, the females (Yakshis) are particularly mentioned for their aggressiveness and sex hunger; it is possible that these Yakshas, like many of the primitive peoples of South East Asia and Indonesia, were matriarchs ruled by queens.

Anyway, Vijaya married Kuveni and settled down in the island. In his efforts to bring the Yakshas to civilised ways of living he was not very successful; most of them preferred their savage ways to civilisation, indulged in weird rites and cannibalism and offered organised resistance to Vijaya and his reforms. In the end, war became inevitable and most of the hostile Yakshas were killed.

Vijaya now suggested that his men, like himself, should marry Yakshis; but his men not only objected to this but even declared that they would not accept Kuveni as their queen. The war between Vijaya and the Yakshas seems to have led to considerable bitterness and strained relations between Vijaya and Kuveni; and the king eventually put her away.

Vijaya and his men thus found themselves in an unenviable predicament. They had either to sail back to India, where they were unwanted, or perish in Lanka with-

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out leaving any progeny. Vijaya now sent emissaries to Pandy which was the most powerful kingdom in South India at the time, to find out if the Pandyan king could help him out of the situation. The South Indian monarch was helpful; he sent seven hundred Tamil ladies and a princess of the ruling line, to Ceylon. Vijaya and his men married these ladies.

All this is, of course, romance and and not history. But these romantic tales contain an element of truth. Shorn of its mythical embellishments, the accounts would indicate the conquest of Ceylon by Vijaya and his men and the subjugation of the indigenous population; the ancient notions of caste superiority are reflected in the tale of the blue-blooded Kshatriyas' refusal to accept a barbarian woman as their queen. The Buddhist tradition, both in India and Ceylon, traces the origin of Devanampiya Tissa, king of Ceylon, who sent embassies to Asoka, to Vijaya's line. The tradition of the conquest of Ceylon by Vijaya was so strong in ancient Buddhist India that one of the paintings at Ajanta, pertaining to the fifth or sixth century of the Christian era, commemorates this event, and is in a well-preserved state.

Vijaya and his men spoke a dialect of North India and the present Sinhalese language is considered a derivative of the language of Vijaya. Vijaya does not seem to have been a Buddhist; for in his time Buddhism had not risen in India as an important religion. He had possibly heard of the Buddha and his teachings, but the founding of Buddhism on a firm footing belongs to a later age. Anyway, the present-day Sinhalese are considered the descendants of Vijaya and his men while the Veddas possibly represent the original inhabitants whom Vijaya conquered.

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As far as our present knowledge goes, Vijaya was the first Indian, of whom we have reliable tradition, to found a dynasty in a foreign land. The reason for his exile, given in the legendary accounts, does not appear to be very sound. Mere objectionable activities, the details of which are not given, could not possibly have brought about so severe a publishment. An alternative explanation is that either he led an unsuccessful rebellion against his father or that he was defeated and obliged to flee in a war of succession. Or, may be a love of adventure led Vijaya to leave his country with his men. Whatever the reason for his departure from India, his conquest of Ceylon is now accepted as a fact by all historians, and the history of Ceylon generally begins with Vijaya.

Vijaya is said to have died without issue, after reigning in Lanka for thirty eight years. The people wished to get a king of Vijaya's line and applied to the mother country for a prince; pending the arrival of the heir, the minister of Vijaya, with the title of Upatissa ruled as regent. In due course, a nephew of Vijaya by name Panduvasudeva, with thirty two courtiers came to Ceylon and the regent proclaimed the prince as king of Ceylon. Panduvasudeva brought no ladies with him. Later, it would appear, a princess of the Sakya line with thirty two maids of honour came to Ceylon. Panduvasudeva married the princess and his courtiers, the maids.

Whatever truth there may be in these hoary legends, it is clear that from very early times, Ceylonese kings had looked to North India as their mother country and had kept themselves well-informed of the political and religious developments there. In the reign of Asoka, as we shall see presently, the cultural ties between India and Ceylon

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1. VIJAYA'S CONQUEST OF CEYLON

(From Ajanta)

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became very close, and Ceylon accepted the religious lead of Asoka, and maintained cordial relations with North India.

But Ceylon's relations with the Tamil country were different. For though Vijaya and his men had entered into matrimonial relations with the Tamils, the close proximity of the Tamil kingdoms to Ceylon led to endless political rivalries. In fact the history of Ceylon from the early centuries of the Christian era till European colonial expansion put an end to Asian rivalries in the countries bordering on the Indian Ocean, the history of Ceylon had been a continuous tale of Tamil invasions and Sinhalese repulsions, which have left an unfortunate legacy of strife in Ceylon, down to the present day.

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II

MAHENDRA AND SANGHAMITRA

The Buddha, no doubt, preached a religion that recognized no caste or race and no geographical or political frontiers, but during his life-time and for about three centuries after his death, Buddhists remained an insignificant sect known only in East India. The honour of having made Buddhism a world religion goes to emperor Asoka. This monarch, on becoming a Buddhist, convened a synod of monks in his capital, Pataliputra, in the year 243 B. C. in order to fix the canon and settle certain differences that had risen among the followers of the Buddha; in this synod, known as the Third Council in Buddhist ecclesiastical history, a resolution setting forth the desirability of organising foreign missions for the propagation of Buddhism to countries outside the Mauryan empire was discussed and passed.

The resolution was probably sponsored by Asoka himself, though Sinhalese accounts would indicate that the

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president of the council, the venerable Tissa Moggaliputta, was its author. Whoever might have been responsible for the introduction of the resolution in the council, Asoka implemented its provisions with the vast resources at his command. His inscriptions that have come down to us show that Asoka was a zealous propagandist, and despatched religious missions to countries as far removed from Magadha as Egypt and Macedonia.

In the inscription known as Rock Edict No. 13, Asoka records his missionary activities. After recounting the conquest of Kalinga and the emperor's remorse, the famous text runs as under:

"So what is conquest through Dharma is now considered to be the best conquest by the Beloved of the Gods (Asoka describes himself in these edicts as Devanampiya, 'Beloved of the Gods', or Priyadarsi, "One who looks with Compassion"). And such a conquest has been achieved by the Beloved of the Gods not only here in his dominions but also in the territories bordering on his own dominions as far away as the distance of six hundred Yojanas where the Yavana king named Antiochus is ruling; farther where four other kings named Turamaya (Ptolemy), Antikini (Antigonus), Magas, and Alikasundara (Alexander) are ruling, and towards the south where the Cholas, and Pandyans are ruling, and as far as Tamraparni."

These kings have been identified as the rulers of Syria (Antiochus), Egypt (Ptolemy), Macedonia (Antigonus), Cyrene (Magas) and Epirus (Alexander) who were contemporaries of Asoka. The Chola and Pandyan kingdoms lay to the south of the Mauryan empire. Thamraparni is the old name for Ceylon. In Rock Edict No. 2, the kingdoms of Keralaputra and Satyaputra are also mentioned, in

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addition to Cholas and Pandyas, as lying to the south of the Mauryan empire, while Antiochus is again mentioned as the western neighbour.

The personnel of the missions is not recorded in the inscriptions. Nor do we know how far the efforts of the missions, sent to the Greek kingdoms in the west, were successful; neither India nor the Greek kingdoms have preserved any account of the activities of these religious missions and we know that Buddhism made little headway in the west beyond Persia.

Ceylon, however, has preserved an account of the mission sent to her. It was headed by the royal monk Mahendra.

There are two slightly different traditions, the Sinhalese and the Indian, concerning this first foreign missionary in world history. According to Sinhalese accounts, Asoka had a wild youth and while he was the viceroy of Ujjain during the reign of king Bindusara, he fell in love with a lady named Devi, daughter of a merchant of Vedisagiri (near modern Bhopal) and had by her a son, Mahendra, and a daughter, Sanghamitra. Devi stayed with Asoka during his vice-royalty in Ujjain; but when, on the death of Bindusara, Asoka went to Pataliputra, Devi preferred to stay back with her parents in Vedisagiri. The children, however, accompanied their father to Pataliputra.

Mahendra grew up in the palace at Pataliputra, but from his very boyhood showed a religious bent of mind. On coming of age he renounced the world and became a recluse; he is said to have been ordained at the age of twenty. It was customary for younger brothers of kings in ancient Buddhist kingdoms to become monks in order to

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prevent factions at court and possible civil wars; it is probable that Mahendra had elder brothers by other wives of Asoka and he had followed the ancient Buddhist convention and took to the religious life. Sanghamitra is said to have become a nun, also at the age of twenty.

The Indian tradition gives a more picturesque account of Mahendra's youth and his relationship with Asoka. According to the Buddhist lore of India, Mahendra was not the son but a younger brother of Asoka. He was, we are told, a dissolute youth and indulged in objectionable activities to such an extent that his name became a byword in Pataliputra for wild living. The nefarious life of the young prince becoming intolerable, the citizens lodged a strong complaint with the emperor. Asoka instituted an impartial enquiry and the charges against Mahendra were proved; the offences were found to be of so serious a nature as to deserve capital punishment.

Asoka was much grieved by the whole affair. He sent for Mahendra and said to him: "The charges against you, my brother, have been proved, and according to the law of the land you deserve death as punishment. But if I have you executed, the blood of a brother will be upon my hand, and the curse of ancestors on my head; on the other hand, if you are let free, the citizens will think ill of me for miscarriage of justice. I do not know how exactly to act in this situation; anyway, I give you seven days to repent of your sins, and shall pronounce final judgement at the end of the week."

The emperor had Mahendra shut up in a cell, and as each day passed the sentinel called out to the prisoner that his life had been shortened by a day. The fear of appro-

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aching death, it is said, profoundly affected the young sinner; he repented and gave himself up to intense meditation on the mutability of life. When Asoka went to see him on the seventh day for pronouncing final judgement, Mahendra, it would appear, had already attained Arhathood with the accompanying occult power of darting through space; for before the emperor had the door of the cell opened, the prisoner stood before his judge, having come out of the cell through its walls. The penitent now told Asoka that he abhored the worldly life and wished to repair to a lonely spot in the forests of the Himalayas to lead the solitary life of a Pratyeka Buddha. The ideal of the Pratyeka Buddha, as distinct from that of the universal Buddha who was also a world teacher, was sought after by many saints of the Thera Vada or Older School of Buddhism who wished to lead the life of recluses in solitude and pass on to Nirvana on death.

Asoka, however, pointed out to Mahendra that he would be a help and guide to the Sangha and the people, if he lived in Pataliputra; the saint appreciated the force on this argument and agreed to the emperor's proposal. On this, a monastery was built in the palace grounds for his residence; as a monk, Mahendra was expected to beg for food which he did in the palace precincts.

Mahendra now took to religion with the same zeal he had erstwhile shown for vice. He studied the Buddhist scriptures so thoroughly that he was able to memorise the whole canon; this stood him in good stead in Ceylon where he is reputed to have repeated the whole text orally to his Sinhalese disciples.

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The favoured choice of Mahendra as the apostle of Ceylon was not without sound reasons. Ever since the conquest of Ceylon by Vijaya, Sinhalese kings, as we have seen in the first chapter, had looked to India for cultural guidance and had cultivated the friendship of important kingdoms of North India. With the rise of the Mauryan empire and the opportunities it offered for trade and cultural contacts, Sinhalese kings started sending regular diplomatic missions to Pataliputra, and the port of Tamralipti in Bengal rose as an important centre of trade between the Mauryan empire and the island of Ceylon.

Asoka's fame as one of the greatest monarchs of his age spread far and wide, and Tissa, his Sinhalese contemporary, not only continued the ancient contacts with North India but took particular care to cultivate the friendship of the great Buddhist emperor. On his coronation as king of Ceylon, Tissa sent a mission to Asoka; the embassy returned from Pataliputra with a personal message from Asoka and costly presents and the royal insignia. Tissa considered these friendly overtures of Asoka of such momentous importance that on receipt of the royal insignia from Pataliputra, he was crowned for a second time. Moreover, Tissa, like Asoka, assumed on his coronation the title of Devanampiya. Sinhalese religious accounts even maintain that Tissa and Asoka were uterine brothers in a former birth.

To such a staunch ally, Asoka could possibly send no better missionary than Mahendra.

In those days, the usual method of travel between Pataliputra and Ceylon was by sea, the passengers taking ship at Tamralipti. The time taken for the completion of

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the journey from Tamralipti to Ceylon was about two weeks. Mahendra, however, travelled by land with six companions. Sinhalese tradition says that the missionary wished to visit his mother at Vedisagiri, and hence he preferred the overland route. It is doubtful if an Arhat of Mahendra's stature, who had severed all worldly ties, would have been swayed by such sentiments in his momentous mission; the more probable reason, given in the Indian tradition, is that he wished to preach the Dharma in South India, on his way to Ceylon. Anyway, he seems to have visited Vedisagiri, and the origin of the celebrated stupa at Sanchi is traced to Mahendra.

From Vedisagiri, Sinhalese chronicles tell us, Mahendra with his six companions 'flew like swans' into Ceylon as Arhats were reckoned capable of such feats. The Indian tradition, which was followed by the Chinese pilgrims mentions a less miraculous mode of transport; for it is related that he preached in several kingdoms of South India and founded many Viharas in this region. Huien Tsang, who visited India in the seventh century, mentions shrines in the Pandyan kingdom attributed to Mahendra and extant in his time.

The Sinhalese had developed political enmity against the Tamils from very early times in their history, and as such could not take kindly to the idea that the Apostle to Ceylon visited the hated Tamil country first and then came to them; hence possibly, the origin of the pious fiction of Mahendra's coursing through the sky from Vedisagiri without touching South India.

According to Sinhalese legends, Mahendra and his companions alighted on top of the Missaka Mountain

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(Mahintale). Tissa Devanampiya was, at the time, in the mountain, having gone there on a hunting expedition, and he saw Mahendra and his companions landing. The king hastened to make obeisance to the aerial visitors, and finding who they were, begged to be instructed in the Buddhist doctrine. On this Mahendra is said to have put Tissa on an intelligence test in order to ascertain the king's ability to grasp the abstruse Abhidharma or Buddhist metaphysics. Tissa passed the excruciating test, on which Mahendra initiated him into the higher doctrine and discipline of Buddhism. After this, Tissa conducted Mahendra to his capital at Anuradhapura where the royal missionary and his companions were given an enthusiastic reception by the court and the public.

Mahendra is said to have addressed a huge public gathering in the city of Anuradhapura and converted 40,000 people by his first sermon. His preaching was not, however, on the lines of the edicts of Asoka who generally emphasized the need for the practice of the universal virtues of honesty tolerance, forbearance, ahimsa and respect for elders and religious men of all persuasions. Mahendra's first sermon in Ceylon, if we are to believe Sinhalese chronicles, was couched in the language of a prophet predicting doom for a generation of sinners, and the terrors of hell formed its main theme.

Mahendra decided to stay in Ceylon and propagate Buddhism in the island. For his residence, Tissa Devanampiya built a monastery in a park in Anuradhapura which became famous in later history as the Mahavihara Garden. The disciples of Mahendra increased day by day and many a noble and prince of royal blood joined the Sangha. One

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of the converts to the new faith was princess Anula and she wished to join the order; Mahendra now found himself in a difficult situation as he had no nuns with him, and according to Buddhist monastic discipline only a nun could ordain a woman. In this predicament Mahendra requested king Tissa to send a mission to Asoka to obtain competent nuns for the Sinhalese Sangha.

The nun who came to Ceylon, in response to Tissa's request, was no less a personage than Sanghamitra, Mahendra's sister. She was perhaps the first woman missionary in world history to leave her native land in order to propagate her faith in foreign countries. Nor did she come to Ceylon empty-handed, for she brought with her a cutting of the famed Bo-tree of Gaya under which the Buddha had obtained enlightenment. It is related that Asoka himself supervised the cutting and transport of the branch from Gaya to the port of Tamralipti; for Sanghamitra and her retinue, unlike Mahendra and his companions who took the overland route, travelled to Ceylon by sea.

The representation of a tree being transported, carved at Sanchi, is believed to be of the branch of the Bo-tree Sanghamitra took to Ceylon.

Sanghamitra and her companions of nuns were received with great honour in Ceylon. The cutting of the Bo-tree was ceremonially planted; and this tree, like Buddhism itself in Ceylon, took firm root and grew, and is pointed out to travellers at present as the oldest tree in the island.

Thus Mahendra founded the order of monks and Sanghamitra that of nuns in Ceylon and both are revered in the island as the founders of the Buddhist Church of Ceylon. Both brother and sister laboured ceaselessly for

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the propagation of faith in the island and adopted it as their own land. Mahendra, after establishing the Church on a firm basis, passed away during the sixtieth annual retreat after his ordination, which would mean that he was about 80 years of age at the time of his death. Sanghamitra died two years later.

The Mahavihara monastery founded by Mahendra became the most celebrated centre of Southern Buddhism (also known as Hinayana or Thera Vada), the kind of Buddhism professed and propagated by Asoka, with its canon compiled in Pali. At present Burma, Siam and Cambodia also profess this form of Buddhism and these countries, all through the ages, had looked to Ceylon as the centre of orthodoxy especially after the decline and disappearance of Buddhism in India. Even pilgrims of the Northern School (called Mahayana) visited Ceylon to study ancient Buddhist lore. Again, when errors crept into the Buddhist Canon in India, it was to the Mahavihara monastery in Ceylon that the celebrated savant Buddhaghosha went, as we shall see later, for consulting the correct version of the canon.

The inspiring source of the strength and fame of Mahavihara was, no doubt, the personality of its great founder, Mahendra.

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III

KAUNDINYA

CIVILISER OF SOUTH EAST ASIA

When Europeans first came to India, they found the Hindus a stay-at-home people particularly lacking in a spirit of adventure. The Brahmins considered India the best of all possible lands, and other countries were reckoned unclean and unfit for Brahmins to live in. Travel abroad was taboo, and the sea-voyage, a major offence which brought, as punishment, immediate excommunication. All this naturally led the Portuguese and other Europeans, who came to the East after them, to conclude that the Hindus throughout their history had strictly confined their activities to India, and that the sea was an element they feared and hated.

With the study of Indology, however, the story of a forgotten chapter in India's past began to unfold itself. Far from being a stay-at-home people, ancient Hindus were found to have been the boldest seafarers in Asia; they had

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built up an extensive colonial and cultural empire which stretched from India to Indo-China and included in its wide sweep the Malay Peninsula, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Bali and other islands of the south. The sea from Ceylon to the Strait of Malacca was once an Indian lake through which vessels plied regularly, carrying merchandise, traders, craftsmen, missionaries, undesirables and adventurers. These ancient colonists of India have left monuments and inscriptions all over Far East and in the islands of the South; in some countries such as Cambodia, Siam, Burma and Bali, a living tradition speaks eloquently of the fallen glory of a forgotten past.

A remarkable feature of the civilisation of South East Asia is that in its heyday, especially in the Khmer Empire and Champa of Indo-China, it was predominantly Brahminic and not Buddhist. While it is comprehensible how Buddhism with its international ideology and missionary zeal found its way to countries outside India, it is not so easily explained how Brahminism with its extreme conservatism, caste rigidity, ceremonial purity, and reluctance to leave the mother country, got transplanted in distant lands beyond the seas and gave rise to a civilisation in the Far East on Indian models.

Anyway, from the time anything authentic is known about the culture and history of the countries of South East Asia (ie: Burma, Siam, Indo-China, Malay Peninsula and Indonesia) we find that Indian influence had been predominant in these regions. The peoples of South East Asia are, no doubt, ethnically different from Indo-Aryans, but the religion, art, architecture, social and legal theories were all Indian, adapted for local conditions. Most of the reigning dynasties bore Indian names and titles and traced

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their origin to Indian settlers or adventurers. The court religion and ceremonial were dominated by Brahmins who had migrated from India and adapted Brahminic ritual to their new surroundings; the dominant language was Sanskrit and even when indigenous languages came into prominence literary inspiration was mainly Indian. Vedic literature was favoured of the scholars, while the Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* inspired popular literature. The *Dharmasastras*, particularly the Code of Manu, was the basis for law. The caste system was accepted in theory, though it was never rigidly enforced in South East Asia; the Brahmins remained aloof; the fighting classes considered themselves Kshatriyas and, in certain regions, claimed superiority over the Brahmins; among the rest of the population, caste distinctions, however, were neither clear nor rigid. The temples, especially of the Khmers and Champans of Indo-China, were reminiscent of the great shrines of medieval India, of Somnath, Mathura, Multan etc., with their vast wealth and pompous ceremonial. Sati was prevalent, at least in Indo-China and in the islands of the south.

Later when Buddhism came into prominence in the countries of South East Asia, there was no antagonism between the two religions, but rather a harmonious blending of Brahminism and Buddhism in what was known as the Shiva-Buddha cult, a conception that Shiva and Buddha were identical, and a person could worship any of the two or, for that matter, any other deity of the Buddhist or Hindu pantheon and obtain salvation in his own way. Both the religions have been particularly fruitful in inspiring splendid monuments like those of Angkor and of Borobodur.

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The Cambodians represent the lineal descendants of the great Khmer race, and the Chams, now without a country but inhabiting the southern provinces of Viet Nam, those of the Champans. The countries from Burma to Indo-China passed under the influence of Hinayana Buddhism mainly through contact with Ceylon, and the Malay Peninsula and the islands of the south, with the exception of Bali, passed under Muslim influence. In Bali, however, Indian civilisation is still dominant, and the Balinese in religion, customs and manners, and in the observance of the caste system are Hindus except in race.

Now the question has often been asked as to who were the pioneers in bringing Indian civilisation to the primitive peoples of South East Asia. While we have abundant evidence, in monuments and in living traditions, of the extensive Indianisation of these regions from very early times, we have no reliable records of the seafarers, adventurers and colonists who transplanted Indian civilisation in these regions. The ancient and medieval Sanskrit inscriptions found in Indo-China and elsewhere give indications of the names and activities of certain kings but no historical data as to the pioneers and original emigrants from India. Indian literature is deplorably deficient in accounts of the activities of her adventurers and colonists. Even the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the twin repository of Indo-Aryan tradition are tantalisingly silent on this point. Except some vague references to Yavadwipa (Java), Suvarnabhumi (Burma) and Suvarnadwipa (Sumatra) there is very little in the epics to enlighten us on the obscure phase of Indian colonisation of the countries of South East Asia.

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The *Dharmasastras* or the Law Codes of the Hindus show there was a flourishing sea-borne trade in ancient India and large scale emigrations from the country. In the Law Book of Baudhayana we find sea-going declared a major offence entailing loss of caste; the law-giver also mentions that northerners were particularly addicted to migration by sea. The reason for this is not far to seek. North India was subject to frequent large scale political disturbances and the welcome the countries of South East Asia extended to colonists from India made large number of Indians leave the country. Certain Siamese accounts, while tracing the origin of Brahmins in Siam and the adjoining countries, mention that four entire Gotras or clans of Brahmins, consisting of several hundred families emigrated from India, due to political confusion in the mother country, and settled down in Siam, Malay Peninsula and Lower Burma. All this would indicate that the prohibition on sea-going was introduced by later law-givers to check depopulation of India due to unrestrained emigration; ancient texts were then interpolated to give the law the sanction of hoary antiquity.

When exactly Indian overseas expansion to the east started is not clear. The inscriptions of Asoka would indicate that, during the Mauryan period, the commercial and cultural contacts of India were generally with the west, mainly with the Greek kingdoms that rose on the death of Alexander. Asoka's inscriptions mention the despatch of missions to countries as far west as Egypt and Macedonia, but none to the east. The *Jataka Tales*, most of which collected under Asoka's reign when the Pali Canon was compiled, also suggest that ancient India's maritime trade was with the west. The Baveru Jataka, for

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instance, mentions that Indian merchantmen regularly visited Babylon and the peacock was introduced into that city by Indian traders. Sailing to Ceylon, as we have already seen in the preceding chapters, were regular, but the mode of navigation was coastal, and direct sailing of the Bay of Bengal had not yet developed. In Asoka's time, for ought we know, the countries of South East Asia were inhabited by backward races, and India had not cultivated cultural or political relations with them.

The Burmese tradition claims that Asoka sent two missionaries, Sona and Uttara, to Burma, and Sinhalese chronicles of a later period confirm this. But all Buddhist countries have shown an anxiety to link their religion with Asoka, and in the absence of any mention of the despatch of missions to Burma in the incriptions of Asoka, the story of Sona and Uttara must be relegated to those realms of fancy which prompted Burma, Siam and Ceylon to claim visits to their country of the Buddha himself. It may also be mentioned that the Burmese have traditions which purport to say that Tapussa and Ballika, the first lay disciples of the Buddha to whom he first preached the law, were Burmese merchants who were on a commercial tour of India.

The colonial and commercial expansion of India to the east appears to have started and developed during the period that intervened between the fall of the Mauryan empire and the rise of the Guptas. The period was one of confusion and largescale nomad movements into India from Central Asia and the Iranian plateaux. The short-lived Kushan empire, under Kanishka, kept some order in the North West of India for some years, but after Kanishka's death towards the close of the first century of the

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Christian era, North India became a cockpit of warring Scythians and Parthians, and many a Brahmin and vanquished Kshatriya must have escaped overseas. We know for a fact, that the Indo-Parthian clan of Pallavas, who had settled down in the Punjab, were obliged to move down south, during the period, and found a kingdom in South India with their capital at Kanchi.

One thing, however, is clear. While there is no evidence of any colonisation or of regular seafaring towards the east before the time of Asoka, by the beginning of the fifth century of the Christian era Indian religions and culture had been firmly established in certain countries of South East Asia, and direct sailing from Ceylon and the eastern seaboard of India to Java and Sumatra was regular. For the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hien travelled by sea from Ceylon to Java, and from this island to China reaching his destination in 414 A. D. He has left us an account of this voyage. The ship had about 200 passengers on board and the crew were Indians. He found Brahminism the prevailing religion in Java and Sumatra. On his voyage from Java to China misfortune overtook the ship he was travelling in, and it was driven off its course by a gale; the Hindu crew considered the Buddhist monk the cause of their misfortune, and on the Brahmin astrologer on board officially confirming their fear, they wanted to land the pilgrim in an uninhabited island, and the intervention of an influential friend on board the ship, Fa Hien says, saved him from certain death.

Historians and archaeologists have discovered sufficient evidence to show that the main dynasties of Indo-China, Java, Sumatra and Borneo were linked by ties of blood, and traced their origin to a mysterious adventurer of Indian

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origin. The Sanskrit inscriptions found in several regions in South East Asia give his name as Kaundinya. Chinese accounts also have copious references to this legendary figure but the name differs in the annals of different dynasties because of the peculiarities of the Chinese language which offer considerable difficulty in transliterating Indian proper nouns without obvious meaning.

The earliest account of Kaundinya and of Indian influence in South East Asia comes from a Chinese traveller named K'ang T'ai who visited Indo-China in the years 245—250 A. D. The most important kingdom of South East Asia at the time was known to the Chinese as Funan; it covered a good part of Indo-China, extended as far as Lower Burma and the Malay Peninsula, and had several kingdoms as its tributaries of which Chen-la, later to rise as the Khmer empire, was one. Funan was a maritime kingdom and its sway probably extended to the islands of the south. The ruling dynasty, when K'ang T'ai visited Funan, was of Indian origin and he gives an account of the legend current in his time of the founder of the dynasty. "In the olden days," says K'ang T'ai, "Funan had a woman named Lieou-ye (Willow Leaf) for ruler. At that time, in the country of Mo-fuo was a man Houen-chen by name who worshipped a Deva with devotion. The Deva was so pleased with the piety of the devotee that one night he appeared before Houen-chen and gave him a celestial bow and asked him to set sail in a boat towards the east; Houen-chen did as he was told and, guided by a fair wind, he reached Funan. Willow Leaf, seeing the intruder, came out with her fleet, and gave him battle; but Houen-chen shot a magic arrow from the celestial bow and wrecked the boat of the queen. On this the queen submitted to Houen-chen and married him."

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The inhabitants of Funan at the time, it would appear were naked savages, and Houen-chen himself is said to have taught the queen the elements of modesty. It is related that he "dressed Willow Leaf in a fold of cloth with a hole through which she passed her head. He also made her do her hair in a knot." Thus the Indian origin of feminine fashions in Cambodia. The piecegoods merchants of India, we can be sure, actively supported Houen-chen in his war on nudity.

K'ang T'ai says that in his time women went about properly clad, but men's attire left much to be desired; he himself, it would appear, prevailed upon the reigning monarch to introduce proper clothing for men. Anyway, in K'ang T'ai's time, Funan had regular diplomatic relations with Indian kings, and an envoy from the king of the Murundas (an ancient people of the Ganges Valley) had arrived at the court of Funan while K'ang T'ai was there.

While the legend narrated by K'ang T'ai is found with slight variations in the court annals of several dynasties of China, the Tsin Chronicles give the name of the bowman as Hun-hui, the Li-ang annals, as Ch'iao-chen-ju and the Ch'i Chronicles as Hun-tien. All these are believed to be Chinese transliterations of the Sanskrit name Kaundinya. A sanskrit inscription, discovered in Mi-son in Indo-China, however, clearly gives the name of the founder of the Indian dynasties of Indo-China as Kaundinya. The inscription is dated, and corresponds to the seventh century of the Christian era.

It is not clear from Chinese accounts or from Sanskrit inscriptions so far discovered, who this Kaundinya was, or from which country he hailed. Mo-fuo, mentioned

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by K'ang T'ai has not been identified. It is probable that Kaundinya sailed direct from India and the naval action against him by Willow Leaf took place on the western side of the Isthmus of Kra which possibly was part of the territory of Funan. Or it may be that Kaundinya sailed from an Indian colony already established in Java or the Malay Peninsula.

The Kaundinya legend of South East Asia connects him with the Brahmin warrior Asvathaman, son of the redoubtable Drona of Mahabharata fame. It is interesting to note that the Pallavas of South India also claimed descent from Asvathaman. The Pallavas, as already noticed were of Parthian origin and were driven south from the Punjab during the political confusion that followed the disruption of the Mauryan empire and the Scythian invasion that came with its fall. Pallava, the originator of the line, is fabled to have been the son of Asvathaman and the Apsara (celestial dancer) Madani; the baby was concealed in a cradle of sprouts and was hence named Pallava, meaning 'cradle of sprouts.' Anyway the Pallavas built up an important maritime kingdom in South India and their capital the city of Kanchi, had extensive trade relations with the countries of South East Asia. Further, there were regular Kaundinya Gotras of Brahmins in South India; according to K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, "a Tamil poem of the first or second century A. D. contains a full-length protrayal of a Kaundinya Brahmin, an inhabitant of one of the villages of Tanjore."

Another very important factor that links the Kaundinyas of South East Asian legends to the Pallavas of Kanchi is the fact that the king, both in Indo-China and

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Indonesia, assumed, on coronation, an epithet ending in Varman, such as Jaya-Varman, Yaso-Varman, Mula-Varman etc. This was an ancient South Indian practice particularly favoured of the Pallavas. Besides, many of the inscriptions discovered in the countries of South East Asia are definitely of Pallava script and style.

All this would indicate that Kaundinya was a scion of the Pallava line, and he was mainly responsible for civilising the countries of South East Asia and for founding an important dynasty of kings the sway of whose progeny extended to almost all the important countries of South East Asia.

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IV

KASYAPA MATANGA

FIRST INDIAN MISSIONARY TO CHINA

It is easy to understand the rapid spread of Indian culture to the countries of South East Asia; the regions east of India as far as Indo-China, and the islands of Sumatra, Java, Bali, etc., were all inhabited by primitive people when Indian colonists, traders and missionaries brought Hinduism and Buddhism, Indian art and architecture, legal codes and social theories, to these lands in the early centuries of the Christian era, and Indian cultural leadership was readily accepted by the indigenous peoples.

But the case of China was different. This important country had already developed an independent civilisation of its own without any aid from India or the ancient civilisations farther west. The Chinese considered themselves superior to the races they came in contact with and the countries around ancient China generally looked to her for cultural and political guidance. Hence it is difficult to understand

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the spread of Buddhism, and with it Indian cultural ideals to China whose rulers styled themselves 'Sons of Heaven' and thought themselves competent to superintend the affairs of deities and spirits. And the situation becomes all the more intriguing when we consider the fact that India herself took no initiative in the matter, but China came to India seeking spiritual aid. China was, as Saint-Hilaire has put it, 'proselytised in reverse.'

There was, however, one good reason why China sought the aid of India. The Chinese had never been deep in religion. In spite of their ancient civilisation, they had not developed that spirit of enquiry into something greater than life which is the essence of Indian religions. Confucianism was mainly concerned with traditional good conduct, correct behaviour, court ceremonial and respect for ancestors. Taoism had, no doubt, the nucleus of a great religion in it, and Lao Tse, its founder, was a man of deeper spiritual insight than his contemporary Confucius (sixth century B. C). But Tao, the Universal Spirit, of Lao Tse lacked the intense reality of the Atman of the Hindus; the ideal Taoist was a carefree wanderer who lived in tune with nature and not with the Infinite; if he fled from the city, it was to free himself from the artificial atmosphere of man-made society and not for the sake of salvation from life. The lesser Taoist, the priest, loved the good things of life and was mainly concerned with controlling the spirit world for the material advantages of man and concocting the Elixir of Immortality, an expensive magic potion of doubtful utility which was believed to make its swallower live for ever. Neither Taoism nor Confucianism could shake off the essential pragmatism of the Chinese character, and both showed reluctance to investigate the origin and end of life

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or to probe the reality that lies beyond the phenomenal world. Chinese religious literature is in no way comparable to that passionate search for reality that forms the main burden of the *Upanishads*, nor to that relentless search for truth that made Gautama a Buddha.

The Chinese attitude towards the religious life is best illustrated by the words of Confucius who asked his followers to respect the spirits and sacrifice to them but to keep away from them. It was considered bad form for a person to evince unnecessary curiosity concerning the activities of the spirits and enquire into them. Such an attitude could not, for obvious reasons, evolve a religion of the type of Buddhism, Christianity or Islam; in fact the Chinese had never claimed that they had a message for the redemption of humanity, nor did they think it necessary to preach Confucianism or Taoism in foreign countries. Hence they were quite interested when they learnt that India had a universal message.

The Han dynasty (206 B. C to 220 A. D) was the first in Chinese history to cultivate foreign relations. Chinese civilisation, till then, had developed in practical isolation. The first contacts of China with the outside world started, however, for strategic reasons. The expanding Han empire found the wild nomads on its western borders a perpetual menace to its stability and the Great Wall was not sufficient to keep them in check. It was then that the Hans heard that a powerful kingdom had risen in the Oxus region in Central Asia under a people known to the Chinese as the Yue-Che, a tribe allied to the Kushans who were later to build a great Indian empire under Kanishka. The Hans now wanted to explore the possibility of opening two fronts

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against the Central Asian nomads by entering into alliance with the Yue-Che. The Chinese missions to the Yue-Che country proved eminently successful and China cultivated regular political contacts with the kingdoms of Central Asia, and the western frontiers of the Han empire extended well into Central Asian regions.

In Central Asia, Buddhism had been flourishing from the time of Asoka; and the people generally considered India as the mother of civilisation. The Chinese were now interested in India. They were not well acquainted with its geography and political divisions but had a vague feeling that an alliance with India would be to their advantage.

There were, however, certain diplomatic niceties that prevented the Hans from sending out a regular political mission to India. In China, ambassadors who came from foreign lands were from countries that looked to her for political help or cultural guidance, and such countries were generally listed in the Imperial Chronicles as vassals, and the presents they brought, as tribute. Till the Han period no country which claimed equality with or superiority over China had sent political missions to the Chinese courts, and in the circumstances, the Chinese, great masters of formality and decorum, did not know how exactly to treat India. So the first Chinese mission to India brought no presents but only a beautiful story.

The story was that the emperor Ming-Ti (58-76 A. D.) had a dream. He dreamt that a golden man, at dead of night, flew right into his palace and then disappeared. In the morning, the emperor narrated the dream to the wise men of the court and to dream-interpreters, and they unanimously declared that the mysterious golden man was Fo-

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to (the Buddha) the Indian god, who claimed spiritual sway over the whole universe. The emperor now wished to know something about Fo-to and his teachings from reliable sources in India, Fo-to's own country.

The traditional date of Ming-Ti's dream is 62 A. D. which is considered the official date of the introduction of Buddhism into China. Ming-Ti seems to have thought over his dream for some time, for the first Chinese mission sent to India to obtain information about Buddhism left China in 65 A. D. i.e. three years later. Possibly the representatives of Confucianism and Taoism were not in favour of the emperor's seeking spiritual guidance from India, and he had to use his authority or persuasion to win them over to his way of thinking.

Very little is known about this Chinese mission to India. The mission, however, must have found the land of Fo-to disappointing. For in the year 65 A. D. conditions in India were not in keeping with her high reputation as the civiliser of mankind. When compared with the power and prestige of the Han empire, the Indian kingdoms of the time were insignificant principalities; the Mauryan empire had collapsed, and the Kushans had not yet built up the northern empire under Kanishka. North India, all told, was, at the time, a cockpit of warring Scythians and Indo-Parthians, all struggling for supremacy.

Which exact region in India the first Chinese mission visited to collect information about Buddhism is not known. What is known is that the mission returned to China with an Indian monk and a load of Buddhist scriptures. The name of the monk was Kasyapa Matanga and he was a native of Central India. Another monk, Dharmaraksha, also of Indian extraction, joined the mission in Central Asia on its way back to China.

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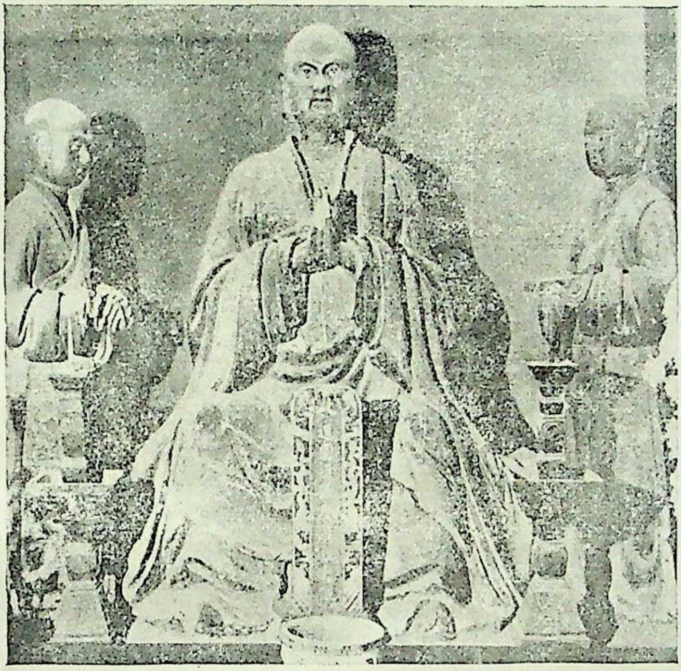
The two monks greatly impressed the Chinese; for they carried their load of books on white horses and the Chinese have always held books in great esteem. The emperor Ming-Ti built a monastery at Loyang, his capital, for Kasyapa Matanga and his disciples. It is significant that this first Buddhist establishment in China was called Pai-ma-se or the White Horse Monastery in memory of the beasts that carried the books.

Ming-Ti's curiosity about the golden man was, it would appear, satisfied with the arrival of the monks and the books. For barring the general patronage he extended to the White Horse Monastery, Ming-Ti took little interest in Buddhism and was content to follow his old Chinese faith. Ming-Ti's brother, Chu Ying, however, became a Buddhist but his conversion did not advance the cause of Buddhism; for he led an unsuccessful rebellion against Ming-Ti and committed suicide. The Buddhist monks were not, however, involved in the unfortunate incident; they were allowed to live a quiet life in the White Horse Monastery.

The Indian missionaries did not start a proselytising compaign in China. Kasyapa knew that the way to China's heart lay through her literature and he assiduously studied the Chinese language and the Confucian classics and started translating into Chinese the Buddhist books he had taken with him. The translations ascribed to Kasyapa and his companions are many, but only one, known as *The Sutra of Forty-two Sections*, has come down to us. This work, composed in 67 A. D. shows Kasyapa's familiarity with the literary conventions of China. Setting forth the basic tenets of Buddhism in simple language for the benefit of the lay reader not well acquainted with Buddhism, it is

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2. KASYAPA MATANGA

(From Loyang, China)

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written in the style of *The Analects of Confucius.* Every section in the *Analects* begins with "Confucius said" or "The Master said" and in *The Sutra of Forty-two Sections* each paragraph is headed "The Buddha said." The distinctive teachings of the first Indian missionaries to China, as embodied in the *Sutra*, were the doctrines of Karma and rebirth, the need for right living and meditation, and respect for life including that of animals.

The exemplary life of Kasyapa and his disciples, and their studious habits attracted a good deal of attention in China, and the White Horse Monastery rose to prominence as a centre of learning. Scholars from all over China were drawn to the monastery, and saints and savants from famous centres of Buddhism in Central Asia and North India came to China to help the monks of the monastery in the work of translation.

During the Han period a powerful combination of Confucianism and Taoism prevented Buddhism from making much headway in China and only the curious and the intellectual were interested in the new religion from India. But with the collapse of the Han dynasty and the conquest of a good part of China by the Tartars, Buddhism, favoured of the conquerors, emerged as a popular religion in China. By the end of the fourth century of the Christian era, it was recognised, along with Confucianism and Taoism, as one of the established religions of China, and in certain provinces the majority of population was Buddhist. This period also ushered in the great era of Chinese pilgrimage to India, which began with the visit of Fa Hien towards the close of the fourth century of the Christian era and ended only with the Muslim conquest of India.

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One of the most potent factors that made Buddhism and its culture the most dominant force in ancient Asia was the dissemination of knowledge effected through translations of original texts and commentaries from India. Chinese Buddhists have, perhaps, produced the most voluminous religious literature in the world and a large part of it is either translations of Indian works and their commentaries or treatises based on these. Incidentally, it may be mentioned that a great many original works on Buddhism were lost in India but translations were preserved by the Chinese.

Even as the pioneer of a literary movement that had such far-reaching consequences, Kasyapa Matanga deserves an honoured place among the immortals of ancient India, while his contribution to the spread of Buddhism in China is invaluable in the light of later history.

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V

KUMARAJIVA

We are apt to think of India as a single, unchanging political unit with well-marked geographical boundaries. This is mainly a legacy left by more than two centuries of British rule. But India, especially before the Muslim conquest, had never conformed to the boundaries which we became familiar with, after British occupation. Except during some brief periods of the sway of certain great empires like the Mauryan, what we call India was generally divided into several kingdoms, and at times several countries like Afghanistan and part of Persia and Central Asia formed provinces of an empire with its capital in India. Pre-Muslim India can be compared to Europe with its independent political units but having a common religion and cultural heritage.

At the time of Asoka, the Mauryan Empire covered Afghanistan and part of Persia and Central Asia. Under Kanishka, who ruled towards the close of the fiirst century

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of the Christian era, the Kushan Empire extended from the Punjab to the Oxus region, well into Central Asia, with Kashmir and North West India as its central regions. Kanishka's capital was Purushapura (Peshawar), and his active patronage of Buddhism and its culture made the Punjab, North Western India, Afghanistan, Kashmir and Central Asia one cultural as well as political unit. Even after the disruption of the Kushan Empire, this cultural commonwealth flourished, and there was a regular flow of scholars and missionaries between India and the city states of Central Asia.

An important personage, typifying this cultural fusion of India and Central Asia, was the brilliant scholar and saint Kumarajiva, who lived towards the close of the fourth century of the Christian era. It is difficult to say of him whether he was an Indian or Central Asian, as he was imbued with the great traditions of both the countries and lived at a time when these traditions tended to blend into one. And what is much more interesting, the major part of his active life was spent in China where he came to be looked upon as the greatest exponent of Buddhism of the age; in China he enjoyed imperial favours seldom shown to a foreigner before or after his time.

Kumarajiva's father Kumarayana, was the hereditary minister in an Indian state, the identity of which has not yet been established. For some obscure reason Kumarayana relinquished his position in favour of a near relative, and left for Kuci, then a flourishing city state of Central Asia. The king of Kuci employed him in his service, and Kumarayana, by virtue of his wisdom, learning and piety, became Rajguru or Royal Chaplain, and the king bestowed upon him the princess Jiva in marriage. Kumarajiva was born of this union.

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Shortly after Kumarajiva's birth, his father, it would appear, died and his mother, Jiva, became a Buddhist nun. She was a zealous adherent of the faith and wished to bring up her son as a devout Buddhist and educate him in the lore of her religion as best as she could. At that time Kashmir was considered the most important centre of Buddhist learning, and when Kumarajiva was nine years of age, Jiva took her son to Kashmir where she put him under the charge of a well-known teacher named Bandhudatta. The religious precocity of the boy made him master a good deal of Buddhist lore at a very young age, and by the time he completed his education in Kashmir, Kumarajiva was known, throughout Central Asia and Kashmir, as a brilliant scholar and able exponent of Buddhist philosophy. After winning many honours in Kashmir, he returned to Kuci.

Kuci was the most important kingdom of Central Asia at the time and a celebrated centre of Buddhism. Chinese chronicles say that it contained a thousand stupas and Buddhist temples, and a magnificent palace. The city had a salubrious climate and was enclosed in a triple wall. It was a prosperous trading centre, well-known for its wealth. Kumarajiva quickly rose to fame in Kuci and became the leading light of Buddhism in Central Asia and his fame spread even to China.

The ruler of Kuci, for reasons not explained, fell out with the Chinese, and emperor Fu-chien of the Tsin dynasty, sent an expedition, under the famous general Lu-Kuang, against Kuci. The city was conquered in 383 A. D. and among the captives taken was Kumarajiva. It is related that Lu-Kuang was so taken by the climate, situation and way of life of Kuci that he wanted to settle down in this

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city, but Kumarajiva predicted a great future for him in his own land and persuaded him to return to China. Kumarajiva accompanied Lu-Kuang to China.

We may rightly wonder how Kumarajiva, a leading personality of Kuci and son of the Rajguru of the kingdom, transferred his allegiance from his own sovereign to the foreigner Lu-Kuang and accompanied him to China without any qualms of conscience. In defence of this action, it may be mentioned that it was a remarkable characteristic of Buddhist scholars and saints that they were somewhat indifferent to patronage and parochial sentiments which appeared to them transient and trivial when compared with their zeal for eternal verities. When for instance, Anawrata, king of Pagan, invaded Thaton in the eleventh century he carried off Manohari, the king of Thaton together with all the learned monks of his capital, and the monks were found as anxious to serve Anawrata as they were to serve their erstwhile patron. To the ancient Buddhist monks conquest and fall of kingdoms were of minor importance as long as they could obtain an appreciative hearing for their sermons, no matter from whichever direction it came.

Anyway, Kumarajiva's prophesy was fulfilled and general Lu-Kuang carved out a kingdom for himself and is known in Chinese history as the founder of the Southern Liang. Kumarajiva flourished under Lu-Kuang's patronage. The power of emperor Fu-chien waned and towards the close of the fourth century Lu-Kuang and his successors became the virtual emperors of China, and Kumarajiva was appointed Kuo Shih or Director of Public Instruction. He was generally known in China as a walking encyclopaedia of Indian learning.

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From the time of Kasyapa Matanga, Indian and Central Asian monks, as we have seen, had been engaged in translating various Buddhist works from Sanskrit into Chinese, but Kumarajiva is considered the first of the great translators. The difficulty with the earlier translators was that they knew either Sanskrit or Chinese well but not both, and none of them had the intellectual brilliance to grasp and render into words the difficult branch of Buddhist learning known as Abhidharma or the Greater Doctrine which was mainly metaphysical. Kumarajiva's studies in Kashmir gave him proficiency in Sanskrit and he was a gifted intellectual; further, he was no bigot but kept an open mind and studied not only the philosophies of the various schools of Buddhism but also the Vedas and the philosophical systems of Brahmins and Jains. Thus he obtained exceptional proficiency in the metaphysical doctrines of all Indian schools of thought. Again, his flair for languages and intense study gave him mastery over the Chinese language which no Indian or Central Asian scholar had obtained before. Hence his translations of Buddhist scriptures are reckoned the best in the Buddhist literature of China.

From 383 to 413 A. D. (the year of his death) Kumarajiva worked ceaselessly for scholarship in general and for Buddhist learning in particular. Fifty extant translations are ascribed to him. His disciples are said to have numbered 3,000 and he used to lecture in a special hall built for him by the emperor.

We know little about the human side of Kumarajiva's character. But it would appear he had his weaknesses if not lapses. On his deathbed Kumarajiva's last warning to

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his sorrowing friends and disciples was: "Judge me by my works; they are eminent and pure. But do not take my life as your ideal. The lotus grows from the mud. Love the lotus and discard the mud". This was perhaps the expression of a saint's humility. Or did the transfer of allegiance from Kuci to China have something to do with it?

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VI

GUNAVARMAN

When Fa Hien, the Chinese pilgrim, visited Java early in the fifth century of the Christian era, he found Brahminism flourishing in the island but Buddhists were few. The island had developed regular trade with India, Ceylon and China, and as such Buddhism was known in Java as well as in the neighbouring island of Sumatra, but the religion of the court and the nobles was Hinduism, and Brahmins were the guardians of popular religion. Soon after Fa Hien's visit, however, a great Buddhist missionary arrived in Java, and both Sumatra and Java were converted to Buddhism which remained the main religion of the islands till the Muslims converted both islands to Islam. The Buddhist missionary who is credited with the conversion of Java and Sumatra was Gunavarman, a monk from Kashmir. The importance Buddhism gained in Java is borne out by the fact that its greatest monument, the stupa of Borobodur, was built by a king of the Sailendra dynasty of Java whose reign is linked with the heyday of Java's glory.

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We are indebted, for the biographical details of Gunavarman, to a Chinese work entitled *Kao Seng Chuan* or *The Biographies of Eminent Monks*, written in the sixth century of the Christian era based on older works and the oral traditions of the time. It would appear from this book that Gunavarman was descended from a line of oppressive rulers in Kashmir. His grandfather, Haribhadra we are told, had to abdicate because of a popular uprising and spend the rest of his life in hiding in the forests of the Himalayas. Haribhadra's son and successor, Sanghananda was scarcely better than his father; he too abdicated and had to live in exile when Gunavarman, his son, was raised to the throne.

Gunavarman too abdicated, not because of rebellion or antagonism to his rule, but because of his religious interests. As a young man he was powerfully attracted to Buddhism and after his coronation, he discarded his crown for a monk's bowl and retired to a monastery, and another prince of the royal line ascended the throne.

In the monastery, Gunavarman gave himself up to intense study of Buddhist scriptures. When he was thirty years of age, the king of Kashmir died, and the ministers, finding no suitable prince who could rule them went to Gunavarman in a deputation and requested him to come back to the court and resume his regal duties. This disturbance of his religious pursuits so annoyed Gunavarman that he lost faith in human nature; he not only rejected the request of the ministers to go back to the court but, wishing to sever his connection with all humanity, repaired to a lonesome forest in the Himalayas to become a Pratyeka Buddha.

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'Pratyeka Buddha' would need some elucidation. In primitive Buddhism known as the Hinayana, some monks sought individual salvation and lived like Hindu hermits, in mountain caves and other inaccessible regions, spending their lives in meditation and eating what food chance brought them. The ideal is knowu as that of the Pratyeka Buddha (individual Buddha, as distinct from universal Buddhas like Gautama who are also world teachers and lived among men guiding them). In preference to the ideal of the Pratyeka Buddha, the Mahayana or the Greater Church held that the Bodhisatva or Buddha-to-be was a greater individual; the Bodhisatva could obtain salvation or Nirvana and the practical annihilation it implies, if he would, but he deliberately deferred Nirvana till the last of sentient beings was saved, so that he could help suffering creatures till the end of time.

The ideal of thc Pratyeka Buddha does not seem to have appealed much to Gunavarman; he felt he had rejected mankind in a hurry. In his solitary wanderings and meditations, he could find neither peace nor happiness and his heart went back to the world of suffering humanity. His compassion for a pain-ridden universe made him, in the end, leave his Himalayan seclusion and come back to the monastery in order to enlighten benighted humanity.

The royal monk's fame had by now spread throughout the Buddhist world, and he received invitations from kings in India to visit them and teach the Law. Responding to the call, Gunavarman embarked on a vigorous missionary campaign. After touring all over India and visiting most of the famous centres of Buddhism in the country, Gunavarman started his evangelical work in foreign countries.

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The first country Gunavarman visited in his missionary compagin was Ceylon. This island was, at the time, a leading Buddhist centre, the seeds sown by Mahendra and Sanghamitra (Ch. II) having grown into fine trees. Ceylon was then considered the one place in which Asokan Buddhism and the Canon, as fixed in the Third Council, were preserved in their purity. Gunavarman stayed in Ceylon for some years studying the scriptures and preaching to the Sinhalese.

Ceylon was at that time in active commercial contact with the island kingdoms of Java and Sumatra. Gunavarman must have heard from the merchants and travellers who visited the islands that the Law of the Buddha was not so well followed in the islands as in other civilised countries of Asia. As it was customary for Hindu and Buddhist kings to invite to their court eminent religious men, Gunavarman had also possibly received an invitation from the king of Java.

In Java Gunavarman was well received by the court and the nobility. Whatever might have been the attitude of the Brahmin hierarchy of the island, the missionary made a great impression on the king and the people. The king embraced Buddhism and requested Gunavarman to live in his kingdom and be a guide to him and his people. Gunavarman was not averse to the proposal as he found that he had a great deal to do in the region; for the peoples of Java and the neighbouring islands were in a very backward state, and the missionary wished to bring them under the Law of the Buddha. Gunavarman preached the Law in Java and Sumatra, Celebes and Borneo, in Malay and Indo-China.

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Eventually Gunavarman's fame reached the imperial court at Nanking. China was beginning to be greatly impressed by Buddhism, especially as the accounts of Fa Hien's memorable travels in India had evoked country-wide interest in Buddhism and the marvellous land of the Buddha. China also had diplomatic contacts with Java and other countries of South East Asia, and the good Buddhists of Nanking thought that China should be honoured by a visit by the great saint and missionary who was then resident in Java. So a deputation of bonzes from the monasteries of Nanking waited on the emperor and requested him to invite Gunavarman to the Chinese court.

The emperor acceded to the request of the deputation and sent a mission of bonzes to Java to bring Gunavarman to Nanking.

Gunavarman accepted the invitation and accompanied the Chinese mission to Nanking. On his way to China he visited his friends and brethern in Malay Peninsula and Indo-China. Gunavarman reached Nanking in the year 431 A. D. ie: eighteen years after Fa Hien returned to China from his travels in India. The emperor himself went to receive the distinguished Indian saint. He was accommodated in the Jetavana monastery of Nanking, named after the famous grove in India in which the Buddha used to reside.

Gunavarman did not live long in China. He is said to have died in the same year as he reached Nanking. But the period of his stay in Nanking must have been a strenuous one. For translations of no less than eleven books are ascribed to him. He must really have been a prodigy to have obtained proficiency in Chinese and translated eleven Sanskrit works in about as many months.

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VII

BUDDHAGHOSHA

In the Hinayana, also known as the Southern School of Buddhism, which is now predominant in Ceylon, Burma, Siam and Cambodia, Buddhaghosha holds a unique position as the compiler of the Pali canon in its present form. Loyalty to the Pali Canon is a distinctive feature of Hinayana Buddhism and it tended to make the countries following the Canon one religious unit, an achievement the Sanskrit Canon, followed by the Mahayana countries of China, Tibet, Mongolia, Korea and Japan, was unable to effect.

We have seen (Chapter II) that the Buddhist Canon was fixed in the Pali language in the Third Council held at Pataliputra in the year 243 B. C. under the auspices of emperor Asoka. The main reason for choosing Pali as the official language of the canon was that it was the literary form of Magadhi or the language of Magadha which, under Mauryan patronage, rose to be the *lingua franca* of Asoka's

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empire and was understood from Afghanistan to Mysore, from Persia to Bengal. Such was the importance of Pali in the Mauryan Empire that it looked as if it would replace Sanskrit as the literary language of India. There was however, another reason for the preference shown for Pali by the Third Council. Sanskrit had been the official language of Brahminism from very early times, and during the Buddha's ministry he found it inseparably linked with Vedic ritual and literature. As the Buddha rejected the infallibility of the *Vedas* and the ritual of Brahminism, with its over-emphasis on the spoken word, he thought it expedient to discourage the use of Sanskrit among his followers; further the Buddha's religion was more popular than esoteric and he usually preached and taught in the dialects of the people few of whom understood Sanskrit. After the Buddha's death, his followers generally followed his example, and when the canon was fixed in the Third Council, the monks selected Pali as the official language.

But Pali did not last long in India. After Asoka, the Mauryan Empire collapsed, and with its fall, Pali lost its importance. What exactly happened to Pali during the Scythian invasion of India, that followed the disruption of the Mauryan Empire, is not known, but with the rise of the Kushan Empire, towards the close of the first century of the Christian era, there was a reaction among Buddhists in favour of Sanskrit, and the use and study of Pali fell into neglect. The Kushan emperor Kanishka was an active patron of Sanskrit, and Asvaghosha, the Buddhist saint and patriarch who lived in his court, was an accomplished Sanskrit scholar and dramatist. Kanishka's partiality to Sanskrit is further attested by the fact that in the Fourth Council of Buddhism, convened in Kashmir on his orders,

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the official language of the proceedings was Sanskrit and not Pali, and Asvaghosha was appointed literary adviser to the Council. With the rise of Mahayana Buddhism* as distinct from Asokan Hinayana, a new canon in Sanskrit came into force. In the age that followed, Sanskrit became the literary language of the Buddhists as well as the Brahmins in India.

But in the absence of a central authority in Buddhism to enforce doctrine and discipline, a good many unauthorised accretions crept into the canon, both in the text and exegetical literature; interpolations began to appear as the fancy of any bumptious monk prompted, and towards the close of the fourth century of the Christian era, a monk named Revata of Northern India, wished to revive interest in Pali in order to check up the existing scripture with ancient texts, expurge interpolations and unauthorised passages and restore canonical literature to its original purity. Revata himself did not have the necessary qualifications to undertake the task, or was probably old when he conceived the idea; hence he was on the look out for a competent person with the necessary zeal and scholarship to execute his plans. Soon he found the proper man.

The person was a young Brahmin of Gaya. In the quaint language of the Sinhalese scriptures, "he was accomplished in the Vigga (Vidya, knowledge) and Sippa (Silpa, arts), had achieved the knowledge of the three *Vedas* and possessed great aptitude in attaining requirements; indefatigable as a schismatic disputant; himself a schismatic wanderer over Jambudwipa, he established himself,

* Detailed accounts of the rise of Mahayana Buddhism will be found in the author's work *The story of the Cultural Empire of India.*

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in the character of a disputant, in a certain Vihara, and was in the habit of rehearsing by night and day, with clasped hands, a discourse which he had learned, perfect in all its component parts and sustained throughout in the same lofty strain." Revata came across this Brahmin zealot and decided to convert him to Buddhism. He challenged the Brahmin, in the manner of ancient scholars, to a philosophic contest in which the losing disputant was to embrace the faith of the victor and become his disciple, if convinced, or offer his head as the price of defeat, especially if the defeat was achieved without convincing the loser. The young Bhahmin, spoiling for a wordy duel, accepted the challenge. In the argument that followed, the young man was convinced of the truth of the Buddhist doctrine as propounded by Revata, became a convert to his faith and accepted Revata as his Guru. Revata christened the convert "Buddhaghosha" for he "was as profound 'in his eloquence (Ghosha) as the Buddha himself.'" Revata now confided to Buddhaghosha his intention of restoring canonical literature to its original purity and Buddhaghosha undertook the difficult task.

Buddhaghosha first started studying Pali, and within a short time obtained proficiency in this classic. Then he made a critical selection of the existing Pali books, and sifted the authentic from what appeared to be spurious. While he was able to collect the full text of the canon, he found that ancient commentaries were not available in India, and without these commentaries many of the texts were unintelligble. Ceylon, however, was reputed to possess the text and the ancient commentaries as transmitted by Mahendra and, on the advice of Revata, Buddhaghosha proceeded to Ceylon to study the canon preserved in the island and to check up discrepancies with the Indian versions.

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In Ceylon, Buddhaghosha found no Pali Canon but only Sinhalese translations. What happened was this: Mahendra and his companions had orally transmitted the canon to their Sinhalese disciples. In ancient India, it may be recalled, the regular method of transmitting scriptures was by word of mouth, and scholars knew by heart the *Vedas* and other texts and taught select disciples to memorise them. Reducing a sacred text to writing was feared to involve the loss of its sanctity. This ancient Brahminic practice was followed by the Buddhists too and it was in conformity with this tradition that Mahendra repeated the canon to his Sinhalese disciples.

In the first century B. C. the Sinhalese decided to write down the canon. The volume of sacred literature, what with commentaries and commentaries on commentaries and original works by eminent saints and savants, increased to such an extent that it became practically impossible for scholars to study by heart even a considerable part of religious literature. Hence after consulting the learned monks of the time, king Vattagamini of Ceylon caused the Pali scriptures to be written down in Pali itself.

Now Pali seems to have had a chequered career in Ceylon too. Soon after the writing down of the canon, Sinhalese began to rise as the national language of Ceylon and became important enough to claim several religious works. The study of Pali began to fall into neglect, and in the reign of king Buddhadasa, towards the close of the fourth century, a scholarly monk named Mahadhammakathi translated the canon from Pali to Sinhalese. After this, no one seemed to have cared what happened to the Pali originals, and the monks were generally content to read and study Sinhalese translations.

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This was the position when Buddhaghosha reached Ceylon in the reign of king Mahanama (458-480 A. D). The Mahavihara monastery, founded by Mahendra was still flourishing in Anuradhapura, though Abhayagiri, another monastery, had risen as a rival. It was, however, to the Mahavihara that Buddhaghosha first went. Here certain Sinhalese commentaries were read out to him by the learned monk Sanghapala, and explained. Buddhaghosha on hearing this was satisfied that the commentaries were authentic translations of the original, and decided to study the Sinhalese language and re-translate the whole canon from Sinhalese into Pali. On telling the Sinhalese monks of his decision, Buddhaghosha was first asked to prove his proficiency in both Sinhalese and Pali to their satisfaction, before they would make over the scriptures to him.

Buddhaghosha was a born linguist and mastered Sinhalese within a short time. When the Sinhalese monks were satisfied that he had obtained proficiency in their language, they gave Buddhaghosha two commentaries and asked him to compose a work based on these. Buddhaghosha produced his celebrated work *Visudhimagga*; this work has been compared by orientalists to the *Imitation of Christ*.

The Sinhalese monks were now more than satisfied with the competency of Buddhaghosha to undertake the translation, and placed their collection of Tripitaka, as the Buddhist scriptures are called, at his disposal. He then repaired to the secluded library of Gandhakara Vihara at Anuradhapura. Here the scholar laboured for years and translated into Pali the text and commentaries of the scriptures. After completion of his work Buddhaghosha, according to Sinhalese accounts, returned to India with copies of the translation.

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In Indian literature, Buddhaghosha is not a familiar figure, but Burmese hold him in great esteem. According to Burmese tradition, he was a monk of Thaton, who went to Ceylon in the year 400 A.D. translated the Tripitaka and returned to Thaton. The Burmese ascribe the origin of their canon to Buddhaghosha. The Burmese claim is possibly founded on Buddhaghosha's visit to their country, and the introduction of the canon there; for Burma had possibly received Hinayana Buddhism from South India as Kanchi was a stronghold of this sect and had extensive overseas trade and cultural contacts with Lower Burma. As such it was but natural that Buddhaghosha would have been anxious to introduce his translation to Burma, and visited Thaton which had probably risen as a centre of Hinayana Buddhism. It is also possible that after returning to Gaya with the scriptures, Buddhaghosha travelled to Burma and lived at Thaton sufficiently long to be reckoned a Burmese. Anyway little authentic is known about Buddhaghosha after his leaving Ceylon.

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VIII

BODHIDHARMA

FOUNDER OF CH'AN (ZEN) BUDDHISM

In the whole annals of foreign missionary enterprise, not only of Buddhism but of Christianity and Islam too, it is difficult to find a more queer and enigmatic individual than Bodhidharma, a South Indian monk, who went to China early in the sixth century of the Christian era and founded there the Ch'an school. Bodhidharma was short-tempered, eccentric and abrupt, and possessed none of the qualities the world generally associates with the successful missionary. Foreign missionaries, as a rule, aimed at influencing reigning sovereigns first and, through them and the court circles, at converting the people; they were loquacious saints who tirelessly preached the infallibility of their doctrines, widely disseminated a knowledge of their faith, predicted damnation for the indifferent and the negligent, and eternal bliss for the pious who followed them. Speaking of Indian missionaries to China generally, they wished to

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impress the Chinese, who had always held learning in great esteem, by their load of books and vast scholarship; they specialised, as we have seen, in translating and distributing profound Buddhist treatises among the learned in China.

Bodhidharma did nothing of the kind. When the Chinese emperor showing great deference to the saint from Buddha Land acquainted him of his own zeal for the faith and consulted him on certain points concerning virtue and merit, Bodhidharma was positively rude without provocation, and abruptly left the imperial presence without leave. Bodhidharma took no books with him to China and translated no scripture into Chinese. He neither preached nor taught. When ardent enquirers wishing to be his disciples sought him for guidance, he was inclined to drive them away. His itinerary was negligible. He spent nine years in China but most of the time he was doing nothing more useful than gazing on a wall. Yet, barrring Gautama, the Buddha, Bodhidharma is the most honoured Indian in the Far East. In fact no foreign missionary had ever achieved so much by doing so little.

Of this interesting Indian missionary, we have no records in Indian literature but Chinese sources have left us a wealth of information. It would appear he was not very famous in his own time, and that is probably the reason why the Indian Buddhist tradition has not preserved any account of him.

Bodhidharma was the third son of the king of Kanchi (Conjeevaram) in South India. There was, as we have already noticed, a convention in Buddhist India (at times also followed by the Hindus) for the younger brothers of a king to renounce the worldly life in order to prevent dis-

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putes about succession, and Bodhidharma seems to have joined the Buddhist order in accordance with this tradition. He accepted as his Guru, a monk named Prajna and the latter, seeing the young man's earnestness and religious zeal, predicted for him a great future. Prajna advised Bodhidharma to preach the true version of the Law in India first and then proceed to China where Buddhism was now fast spreading; Prajna and Bodhidharma thought that the conventional schools of Buddhism were following a mistaken line of faith.

After his Guru's death, Bodhidharma is said to have taught the Law in India for sixty years, and then left for China, by the sea route. The voyage took three years and Bodhidharma disembarked at Kuang Chou in South China in the year 520 A. D.

China at that time was ruled by an ardent Buddhist who wished to emulate Asoka himself in piety and zeal for the Law. He was Wu Ti, the first emperor of the Liang Dynasty. The emperor lived a strict monastic life. He not only prohibited the slaughter of animals but even forbade the representation of living beings in embroidery, lest people, in cutting up such figures, should become callous to the sanctity of life. He lived on a strict vegetarian diet, had the canon edited by learned men, expounded scriptures in public and had treatises on monastic discipline published. Besides, he had embarked on an extensive building programme and had hundreds of monasteries and stupas built all over China for the accommodation of monks and for enshrining relics that were received in China from several Buddhist countries.

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On hearing of the arrival of Bodhidharma, the emperor sent for the missionary. Wu Ti was at Nanking at the time, and Bodhidharma went to the court.

Arhats from Buddha Land were reckoned all-knowing in China in those days, and the emperor wished to know where exactly he stood in the estimation of holy men. Hence he asked Bodhidharma: "Your Reverence, I have practised the Law with zeal for several years, had the Pitakas edited by learned and worthy men, have had hundreds of shrines built in the country, and prohibited the taking of life in all my dominions. How much merit have I accumulated by these acts of piety?"

"None;" was the curt reply.

There was a tense pause. "What is the greatest of the holy doctrines?" Asked the emperor when he found breath.

"The Void! Abysmal Void!!" Said Bodhidharma. He was obviously referring to Nagarjuna's Maddhyamica philosophy of Buddhism which held that ultimate reality was Sunya or the Void and nothing really existed. Anyway, Wu Ti asked a third, very pertinent, question: "If all is the void, who is this person standing before me and answering my questions?"

"I don't know;" was the reply, and the Enigma from Buddha Land walked out of the Imperial Presence.

This was the first and last encounter of Bodhidharma with royalty in China, and neither the missionary nor the emperor wished for a repetition.

Bodhidharma now left Nanking and travelled north. The Yang-tse was in spate at the time, and the missionary is reputed to have crossed the river standing on a blade of

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grass, as Arhats were thought capable of such feats by their occult powers. Bodhidharma now retired to the Shao Lin Temple in Loyang, the ancient capital of China. He is said to have sat motionless in the temple for nine years gazing on a wall. The strange activity or rather inactivity earned for him the nickname "Wall Gazer"; anyway, his fame spread far and wide and scholars and saints came to see the great saint from India and become his disciples. But Bodhidharma had no use for disciples or companions, and he sat immersed in comtemplation of the Great Wall of Shao Lin, impervious to the supplication of enquirers. After several efforts, however, a Confucian named Shen Kuang succeeded in distracting Bodhidharma's attention from the wall. Shen Kuang, after making several unsuccessful attempts, at last stood in snow for seven days and nights within sight of Bodhidharma. When even this did not work, Shen Kuang hewed off one of his arms with the sword he was carrying, and presented it to the Wall Gazer. The gory present interested Bodhidharma, and he asked Shen Kuang what exactly he wanted.

"Your Reverence," said Shen Kuang, "I have been seeking peace of soul all these years but have not found it; pray pacify my soul."

"Produce your soul;" commanded Bodhidharma.

"Alas!" Moaned Shen Kuang, "I cannot find my soul."

"There!" Exclaimed Bodhidharma, "I have pacified your soul." Enlightenment now suddenly dawned upon Shen Kuang, and he was accepted as a disciple by Bodhidharma.

The teaching of Bodhidharma, as can be made out of what he had refused to teach, is that the so-called good

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deeds, the reading of scriptures, the building of temples and stupas, the practice of Panch Shilas, the begging rounds and the yellow robes, in short, all those things the conventional consider meritorious and leading to salvation count for nothing. Teachers can teach you little and books less. What is important is Dhyana (Chinese 'Ch'an', Japanese 'Zen') or concentration, and enlightenment descends on the Dhyani suddenly, and without warning. Because of this theory, the Ch'an is also known as the Sudden or Abrupt Doctrine. The Buddha's enlightenment, it may be mentioned, came suddenly, in fact at a moment of despair in which he felt that he had wasted several years of his life in a vain search; it was during a few hours of concentration under the Bo-tree that he became enlightened as to the cause and cure of suffering.

The object of meditation that brings about omniscience, according to Ch'an conceptions, need not be particularly holy. It may be a stone, a pole, a wall or nothing; all that is needed is intense concentration.

The Ch'an sect flourished in China throughout the T'ang period when it was introduced into Japan where it came to be known as the Zen; the doctrines of Zen became exceedingly popular with the military classes in Japan and formed the basis for the *Bushido* or Japanese code of chivalry.

The Ch'an sect believes in patriarchal succession and Bodhidharma is revered as the twenty-eighth patriarch in India and the first in China. The Abrupt Doctrine, the sect maintains, was revealed by the Buddha himself on the Vulture Peak in Rajagriha, to the learned Kasyapa, who is considered the first Patriarch of Ch'an. We are told

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that Ananda, the Buddha's favourite disciple, on the Master's death, wished to become initiated into Ch'an mysteries and, one day, asked Kasyapa what esoteric doctrine the Buddha had revealed to him. "Ananda", called out Kasyapa. "Yes, your reverence;" answered Ananda. "Pull out the flag-pole at the gate of the monastery;" as Ananda rose to carry out Kasyapa's behest, he became suddenly enlightened.

From Ananda "The Seal of the Buddha Heart" or "The Eye of the Dharma", as the secret Ch'an doctrine is called, was transmitted from patriarch to patriarch till it reached Bodhidharma who carried it to China where he came to be known as the First Patriarch.

The patriarchal tradition continued in China and the sect was noted for the eccentricity of its teachers and the strangeness of its doctrines. As it rejected the burden of books, dogma, conventions and teachings, an enquirer who wished to get instructed in the Ch'an doctrine and approached a patriarch or teacher, usually got blows or irrelevant laconic rebukes by way of instruction. The Ch'an master, Rinzai, for instance, in his youth went from teacher to teacher for instruction and was either whacked by the teacher for his stupidity or called an idiot. The young zealot persisted in spite of these rebuffs, and in course of time became so far advanced in wisdom as to return to his teachers all the blows and bad language he had received from them. Thus the eccentricity of the founder seems to have been bequeathed to the whole sect and its teachings.

The peculiarity of Ch'an doctrine and discipline is best illustrated in the nomination of the sixth Chinese Patriarch Huineng who abolished the patriarchate because of the

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quarrels that led to his own nomination. The fifth patriarch Hung-jen, on becoming old, wished to name his successor and announced that any one who considered himself competent to succeed him should compose a stanza setting forth the Ch'an doctrine in a nutshell and bring it to his notice. On this a very learned monk, considered by his brethren as a master of Ch'an doctrine, composed the following lines and wrote them down outside the meditation hall of the monastery:

> This body is the Bodhi Tree;
> The soul is like a mirror bright:
> Take heed to keep it always clean,
> And let not dust collect on it.

The brethren thought this a remarkable feat and went to sleep meditating on its profound meaning. In the morning, however, when they woke up, they were surprised to find the following lines written underneath the previous day's stanza:

> The Bodhi is not like a tree;
> The mirror bright is nowhere shining;
> As there is nothing from the first
> Where can dust collect from?

The monks made immediate enquiries to find out the author of this impertinence; and what was their surprise when they discovered that it came not from an ordained monk but from a lay brother who was rice-pounder to the community. There was an uproar in the monastery and the rice-pounder, for fear of being man-handled, went into hiding.

At night, however, Hung-jen called the rice-pounder, Huineng, to his cell and made over to him the patriarchal

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3. BODHIDHARMA

(From an old Japanese Painting)

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robe and bowl and asked him to flee for life, which he did. In the morning what transpired at night came to the knowledge of the monks, and a furious party, headed by the monk Ming, started in hot pursuit of the fleeing rice-pounder and overtook him in a mountain pass. Hui-neng turned to bay and told Ming that he could take away the patriarchal bowl and robe and placed both on the ground; but on Ming and his men trying to pick it up, the patriarchal insignia stuck to the ground and he became suddenly enlightened. Ming then acknowledged the superiority of Neng and conducted him with the patriarchal bowl and robe to the monastery.

* * * *

After establishing Ch'an in China, Bodhidharma, it would appear, wanted to return to India. He wished to nominate his successor and summoned all his disciples. In order to ascertain who among them was best suited to succeed him, Bodhidharma said to his disciples: "Now tell me what, in wisdom, each of you has attained."

One of the disciples, Tao-fu, said: "My insight into truth shows that it operates neither through learning nor is independent of it."

"You have my skin;" said Bodhidharma.

The nun Tsung-ch'ih said: "According to my understanding, truth is like Ananda's vision of Paradise; it is experienced once and never again in one's life."

"You have my flesh; "said Bodhidharma.

Then the disciple Tao-yu said: "The four elements are the void and the five aggregates are unreal; in my view there is not one object that can be said to be attainable."

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Bodhidharma said: "You have my bones."

And now came Shen Kuang. He made no declaration of his insight into truth but bowed and took his seat.

"You have my marrow;" exclaimed Bodhidharma and announced him as his successor.

After thus naming his successor, Bodhidharma decided to return to India but before he could embark, death overtook him at the age of 150, according to Chinese tradition. Even death did not put an end to the stories connected with the eccentric saint. The Chinese pilgrim Sung Yun was in India at the time of Bodhidharma's death, and on his return, the pilgrim claimed to have seen Bodhidharma in a mountain pass walking barefoot, holding one sandal in his hand. On this, the coffin of Bodhidharma was opened, and was found to contain nothing but a sandal. This relic was removed, and preserved in the Shao Lin temple.

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IX

PADMASAMBHAVA
FOUNDER OF LAMAISM

Though nearer to India than most other Buddhist countries, Tibet was about the last to be converted to Buddhism. Buddhism reached Tibet only after Korea and far off Japan were converted by Chinese Buddhists, though Tibetan legends claim hoary antiquity for their religion. The reasons for the belated conversion of Tibet were mainly two: for one thing, her inaccessible and mysterious terrain prevented easy commerce, political as well as cultural, and for another, Tibet as a country had not come into prominence in international politics till late, in Asian history.

The Tibetans belong to the same ethnic stock as the Burmese and Nepalese. Their original homeland is believed to be the regions south of the Gobi Desert from where they were driven southward by pressure from expan-

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ding China. At what precise date this emigration took place is not known, but by the seventh century of the Christian era, Tibet had become an influential kingdom in the Tarim Basin, important enough to cultive matrimonial, if not political and cultural, relations with her civilised neighbours. For king Srong-tsan-gam-po, who ascended the throne of Tibet in 629 A. D., married two ladies, one from China and the other from Nepal. These queens were Buddhists and it pained them to see that Tibet followed the primitive Bon religion while the civilised countries of the world known to them considered Buddhism as the religion of enlightened humanity. Hence they suggested to their royal husband the need for introducing Buddhism into Tibet; the king appreciated the suggestion of his wives, and sent an envoy named Thonmi Sanbhota to India to study Buddhism.

What interested Thonmi more than Buddhism was the Indian alphabet. The Tibetan dialect had no script then, and Thonmi who seems to have been a linguist, adopted a modified form of the Indian script for writing Tibetan, and took it to his king. This seems to have satisfied Srong-tsan-gam-po's curiosity concerning Buddhism.

For another century we hear nothing more about Tibetan interest in Buddhism. Probably, the Shamans, as the priests of the Bon religion were called, objected to the import of Budhhism into Tibet, and the kings considered it wise not to antagonise them. Anyway, Srong-tsan-gam-po is worshipped as the Bodhisatva Avalokitesvara by the Tibetans, and his two wives as incarnations of the goddess Tara.

The next important figure in Indo-Tibetan cultural history was king Khri-sron-lde-btsan who ruled Tibet in the eighth century. He was an able and strong ruler, and

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under his leadership Tibet became a powerful state, which successfully checked nomad incursions, dictated terms to the kingdoms of Central Asia and even waged successful wars with China. After consolidating his position, Khri-sron-lde-btsan turned his attention to religious and cultural affairs. Buddhism had, by now, spread to all countries from Persia to Japan, from Central Asia to Indonesia, and was beginning to be considered the hall mark of civilisation. The Tibetan king, not wishing to lag behind others in cultural accomplishments, invited to his court, from India, a Buddhist scholar named Santarakshita to organise Buddhism on a firm footing. But Santarakshita found himself unequal to the task. He was more of a scholar than a missionary and organiser, and he requested the king to send for Padmasambhava who had now risen to fame in East India as a scholar, proselytiser and energetic organiser.

The eighth century in India marks a definite phase in the history of Buddhism. The Hindu revival had started, and Brahminism was fast absorbing the doctrines of Buddhism together with its shrines and worldly goods. The Buddhist zealots of the period tried their best not only to stay the onslaught of Brahminism but to make Buddhism, a world religion by adopting the methods employed by the Brahmins. Something of the spirit of the Jesuits of the Counter Reformation animated the Buddhist doctors and missionaries of this epoch.

As long as a formal acceptance of the Three Jewels of Buddhism (the Buddha, the Law and the Order) was forthcoming, Buddhist preachers of the epoch were prepared not only to recognise but even to encourage many a primitive belief and practice that ran contrary to the teachings of the

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Buddha and to explain away the inconsistency by wide interpretations of the scriptures or by forgotten revelations revived for the purpose. This method, it may be noted, had been successfully adopted by Brahmins who sanctioned and patronised all beliefs and practices, whether or not these were in conformity with early Indo-Aryan religious nations, as long as the infallibility of the *Vedas* was formally accepted and the authority of Brahmins recognised; once the infallibility of the *Vedas* was accepted, individuals were free to interpret the text to suit their convictions or convenience. And the zealot Padmasambhava, in his efforts to make Buddhism all things to all men, sacrificed many a cherished ancient ideal of the faith in order to strengthen Buddhism and familiarise it in all countries.

Details of the life of Padmasambhava are lost in a maze of fantastic legends for which Tibet has always been famous. Even works reputed to be biographical, offer us no help in delineating the personality of this missionary from the fabulous stories given of him. Tibetan accounts show that he was a native of Udayana, in the North-West of India. It would appear that at a young age he migrated to East India, possibly because of disturbed political conditions in his native land.

Padmasambhava studied at the famous Buddhist university of Nalanda. A scholastic life, however, did not interest him; he was essentially a man of action and used scholarship only as a means to advance his activities.

Padmasambhava was powerfully attracted by the Tantric schools of Buddhism then prevalent in Bengal. The peculiarity of the Tantric cult was that it considered the

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4. PADMASAMBHAVA

(Tibetan Painting. Courtesy: The American Museum of Natural History, New York)

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ancient teachings of the Buddha, the doctrines of Ahimsa, forbearance, humility, etc., as ineffective in later ages, as humanity had degenerated to such an extent that the good was generally mistaken for the weak. The Tantrics, hence maintained that a more effective method of combating evil was by doveloping and using occult powers. As such the Tantrics evolved a highly esoteric sex-power-magic cult intended to discover and build up the hidden powers in man through mysterious rites in which communal eating, drinking and sexual intercourse had a prominent role. Padmasambhava mastered these mysteries.

Before proceeding to Tibet, he made a study of the Bon religion of Tibet. This religion had, for its central theme, a firm belief that all human ills were caused by the activities of evil spirits of weird and monstrous shapes. The Shamans had, in fact, organised themselves to wage never-ending war against the spirit world by magic, spells and grotesque rituals of the devil dancing type. And Padmasambhava realised that any man who claimed power over spirits was likely to get a good hearing in Tibet, whatever other doctrines he might have professed.

Padmasambhava reached the Tibetan court in the year 747 A. D. He did not come as a lone missionary preaching the virtues of humility and Ahimsa, but as a powerful Tantric wizard accompanied by a number of Yoginis, or female companions, and disciples, commanding a large number of formidable demons more fearsome than the evil spirits of Tibet. His fame had preceded him, and Padmasambhava received a great welcome in the court and he moved about Tibet as a super-magician, the terror of the spirit world. By powerful incantations known as Dharani,

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and through mysterious revelations known as Terma, he put out devils by the legion. He was reputed to be a master of the mysterious Bru-zha language, the dread of all evil spirits. It is surprising that he instituted in Tibet the worship of not only Buddhas and Bodhisatvas but even of Mara, the arch-enemy and infamous tempter of the Buddha. The reason for giving Mara a niche in the Tibetan pantheon was, in all probability, due to the fact that he was supposed to have under his command, an army of evil spirits, and any celestial or human who controlled demons was held in respect and fear by Tibetans.

Anyway, Padmasambhava founded the Sangha on a firm footing in Tibet. He built the famous monastery of Samye, 30 miles from Lhasa, which became the main seat of Lamaism. This monastery was built on the model of the famous Odantapuri monastery of East India.

Whatever his claim as a master of the spirit world, Padmasambhava did not neglect learning. Sanskrit scriptures were translated into Tibetan, and Samye rose as an important centre of learning and the first establishment in a group that later produced a voluminous literature both sacred and secular.

Padmasambhava is reptuted to have vanished from Tibet, leaving twenty five disciples, all great wizards, to continue the good work he had started. These men, by vigorous compaigns, popularised Buddhism in Tibet, and by the time of Ral-pa-chan, the grandson of Khri-sron-lde-btsan, Buddhism became the established religion of the country. Ral-pa-chan was an ardent Buddhist but his brother Lang-dar-ma was partial to the old religion. The latter headed a faction which successfully revolted against Ral-pa-

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chan; the king was killed and Lang-dar-ma launched an active persecution of Buddhists. "Monasteries were destroyed, Indian monks were driven out of the country, and Lamas were forced to become hunters and butchers. This persecution was, however, short lived for Lag-dar-ma was killed three years after his ascending the throne. The main theme of the religious drama enacted in several Tibetan monasteries at present is this phase of strife in the history of Lamaism.

Though Lamaism founded by Padmasambhava was later reformed by the Indian missionary Atisa (see next chapter) and the Tibetan Lama Tsong-kha-pa, the teachings of Padmasambhava have been followed by the Nying-ma-pa or Old School, commonly known as the Red Hats, because of the preference for red shown by the Lamas of this persuasion. Though many Indians had gone to Tibet after Padmasambhava, none is held in greater esteem, and he is, as a rule, reverently referred to as *the Guru* of Tibet.

Because of the love of the marvellous and grotesque in Tibetan art, religion and literature, it has become difficult to disentangle the real character and personality of Padmasambhava from the fantastic myths and legends Tibetan fancy has woven round him. No Indian teacher has ever attained eminence in his country by mere wizardry, and Padmasambhava could not have been an exception. An ardent Buddhist brought up in the Indian tradition, a student of Nalanda and a well-travelled man, Padmasambhava was not possibly a mere exorcist. In all probability he was that rare phenomenon, the mystic and man-of-affairs combined, that appears in the world once in many years.

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In his zeal for spreading Buddhism in Bon Tibet, he might have posed before the Tibetans as a teacher after their own heart; or they might have painted him so.

Of Padmasambhava's activities outside Tibet we know very little. Tibetan portraits show him, unlike the genial Arhats of the older school, as a strong man of sour visage, the stern ruler of the spirit world.

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X

ATISA

After the establishment of Lamaism by Padmasambhava, Tibet naturally came within the cultural ambit of India which, by the ninth century, embraced most of the Asian countries from Central Asia to Japan, from the Gobi region to Indonesia. But the forces that led to the isolation of India from her cultural commonwealth were already at work at the time. Buddhism with its international temper was steadily losing ground to Brahminism, which was fast developing separatist tendencies, and Islam, which cut many an ancient tie of India with other Buddhist countries like China and Central Asia, was knocking at the gate of India.

In the eleventh century, the Muslim invasion of India started in right earnest, and Mahmud of Gazni, known in Indian legend as the Idol Breaker, made seventeen raids into India, devastated vast regions and caused confusion throughout northern and western India. While Hinduism survived the blow, Buddhism, already tottering under the

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onslaught of Brahminism, succumbed. In North India, Western India and in the North West regions Buddhism disappeared, and both Hinduism and Islam gained by the misfortunes of Buddhism. In South India, Brahminism alone was responsible for the disappearance of Buddhism. East India, however, became the last bastion of Buddhism, and in Bengal, under the patronage of the Pala kings, it enjoyed a brief period of glory before its final extinction in India. But this Buddhism, as we have seen in the previous chapter, was dominated by Tantric influences.

With the Muslim conquest and the political disturbances it caused, large number of Indian monks fled to foreign Buddhist countries like Burma, Ceylon and Tibet. Tibet, however, still looked to India as the fountain-head of Buddhist culture, and sent students regularly to India, especially to Odantapuri and Vikramasila, two important centres of Tantric Buddhism that had now risen in East India. The famous international university of Nalanda was waning in importance.

In the eleventh century, Lamaism was particularly active in Tibet; it had survived the persecution of Lang-darma, was gaining strength as a religio-political organisation and was recognised as the established religion of Tibet. With this rise in power and prestige Lamaism felt the need for better organisation and for purging the sect of certain abuses; several great names in Tibetan ecclesiastical history appear during this period, the more important being La-chen, the disciple of a Nepalese monk, Lo-chen, a Kashmiri teacher, and Yeses-Hod, a royal monk of Tibet, who particularly promoted Indo-Tibetan contacts and sent several young Lamas for higher studies in India. The greatest figure of the period, the teacher who is revered as

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5. ATISA

(Tibetan Painting. Courtesy: The American Museum of Natural History, New York)

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the author of the New Diffusion, as this phase in Lamaism is called, was Atisa.

Atisa was a native of East India, and from the very start of his religious training, showed a leaning towards the Tantric cults then prevailing in East India. He was ordained at the monastery of Odantapuri in Bengal.

Atisa proved himself a Tantric master, and a thorough-going Tantric sect, known as Kalachakra, was founded by him. The cult is highly esoteric and many of its mysteries are not made public. One of the peculiarities of the sect is that a very high place is given in it to the Adi Buddha or Primal Buddha, the author of the universe and of other Buddhas, a theistic conception which was not very strong in early Buddhism. Atisa's raising to prominence the Adi Buddha was considered an effort to combat the rising tide of Islam by the argument that Buddhism was really monotheistic; the main charge against Hinduism and Buddhism levelled by Muslims, who caused extensive destruction of life and shrines, it may be remembered, was that both these religions were polytheistic and idolatrous.

Anyway, there were not many other points of contact between Islam and Kalachakra; for the latter was generally dominated by sex-worship, magic and spells. At present the Kalachakra cult is not prevalent in any Buddhist country except Tibet.

After founding the Kalachakra cult in East India, Atisa went to Burma where he lived for some time. Thaton in Burma was an important centre of Buddhism from very early times, but the leanings here were more towards the Hinayana form in which Tantric ideals were not popular. Atisa seems to have introduced the Kalachakra into Burma.

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For the existing art and some of the practices of Burmese Buddhists indicate that Tantric ideas were not unfamiliar to them, and Atisa was probably responsible for this Tantric phase in Burmese Buddhism if not earlier teachers from Tantric centres in East India. Later, however, Sinhalese influences tended to combat Tantric leanings in Burmese Buddhism and at present Burma is a leading Hinayana country.

From Burma Atisa returned to East India. His greatness was now recognized in all Buddhist countries which had contact with India, and he was made the abbot of the famous Vikramasila monastery of Bengal.

This was a time when North India was having political convulsions. Mahmud of Ghazni was regularly raiding northern India, destroying Hindu and Buddhist shrines and driving Buddhist monks and Brahmins to the east and south. While Brahmins were reluctant to leave India, as the countries of South East Asia were fast becoming Buddhist, Buddhist monks escaped by the thousands to Tibet and Burma. Tibet particularly proved the most important haven of refuge for the monks of East India; the country had received her Buddhism rather late and was still looking to India for guidance and thought it a privilege to offer asylum to Buddhist monks from India.

It was during this period that Atisa took over the abbotship of Vikramasila monastery, and the regular cultural contacts between East India and Tibet made him visit Tibet.

Atisa reached Tibet in the year 1038. Here he found he had a good deal to do; the Tantric cults introduced by Padmasambhava were degenerating and Atisa revitalised it

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by Kalachakra practices. He reorganised Lamaism and is generally known as the author of the Second Diffusion as the Reformation is known in Tibetan ecclesiastical history. Atisa is also said to have introduced a new calendar into Tibet.

Atisa had so much to do in Tibet and he was held in such great esteem that he was induced to settle down in Tibet. He worked ceaselessly for fifteen years, and died in the country of his adoption. Next to the Buddha and Padmasambhava, he is the best honoured Indian in Tibet.

* * * *

Atisa may be said to be the last of the great foreign missionaries of India. By his time Buddhism had ceased to be a living force in India, and its brief period of glory in Bengal was the last flutter of a dying flame. The great days of Buddhist and Hindu cultural expansion were over, and the mother country was generally isolated from her cultural commonwealth. The main centres of Buddhism in India were either occupied by Muslims or taken over by Hindus, and regular pilgrimages from Buddhist countries to the land of the Buddha ceased. India, under Islamic influence, forged new cultural ties with the Muslim world to her west. Ceylon, Burma, Siam and Cambodia tended to become a separate cultural unit, cemented by loyalty to the Pali Canon and the Thera Vada school of Buddhism. Tibet forged new ties with Mongolia and China.

During the British period that followed the Muslim rule in India, the isolation of Hindu India became so complete that the recent discovery of her ancient cultural empire in South East Asia came almost as a surprise.

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